A·CHERRY TREE

AMY LE FEUVRE

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"OH, A.B.C., DO TELL ME! DOES IT MEAN IT IS GOING TO HAVE CHERRIES AT LAST?" (Page 174)

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BY

AMY LE FEUVRE

Author of "Andy Man," "A Madcap Family," etc.

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CHAPTER I

Their Father

"I KNOW exactly what he will be like!"

"Tell us!"

"He will be fat, and red, and have a temper like a fury—like the chap on Nabob's Pickles! They always are like that when they have been in India. It's the sun that touches up their heads, and makes them hot and peppery!"

Eustace spoke as if he were well versed in Indian colonels. Phil lay on his chest and regarded him doubtfully.

"He is sure to be able to shoot well, and I expect will bring tons of tiger-skins back with him, like Larkins' uncle. Larkins said he was a jolly old fellow who tipped him with sovs every time he went to see him. Don't you make him out too nasty, Stacy!"

Then Cherry, who had been making her eyes bigger and bigger with fright, said—

"It is so dreadful to belong to a strange man, and to have to go away with him, wherever he likes to take us!"

"Rather exciting," said Eustace shortly.

"And perhaps," remarked Bonnie, in her soft, lisping voice, "he may kiss us, and like us."

There was a shout of laughter from the boys at this comforting conclusion. Bonnie always made the best of things; Cherry the worst. It was a very important discussion taking place in the nursery. Nothing less than the expected arrival of an unknown father from India—a father who had never written to them since their mother's death now five years ago.

The little St. Legers had always lived with Dr. and Mrs. Burton, who were old friends of their mother's. The two boys came to her just before the Colonel and his wife went out to India; Cherry and Bonnie arrived in charge of an ayah with the interval of a year between them; and all four children had little or no recollection of their parents. Mrs. Burton had been their second mother. She had no children of her own, and she had settled in her own mind that she would have possession of these little motherless ones till they grew up and went out into life, when a letter from their father upset all her calculations, and brought consternation and dismay into her household. It was a short epistle.

"Dear Mrs. Burton,—I am invalided home. Shall live at Instanton. Expect me about 5th inst. Must make fresh arrangements about children. Hope they are well.

"Yours sincerely,

Eustace St. Leger."

"He is going to take them from us," said Mrs. Burton tearfully, as she turned to her husband in the presence of the children, and read this letter aloud. If she had not been so startled and dismayed she would

not have done so. Of course the children jumped at once to the conclusion that their father was coming to fetch them away. The idea brought a mixture of dread and delight to their imaginative minds.

Eustace and Phil attended a small preparatory school in the town close to the doctor's house; Cherry and Bonnie did lessons under Mrs. Burton's superintendence. Between four and five that afternoon they were gathered in the room that was still called the nursery, waiting for their tea. It was early spring, and rain was falling fast outside. For once the boys were satisfied to remain indoors, and the girls were delighted to have them. All four were healthy, rollicking little souls. Eustace, the eldest, was restless in spirit, daring and original in resources. He liked to lead, and only Phil resisted his sway. Phil had a quieter disposition; his hobby was inventions. With a few bits of wood, wire, and string he would produce the most astonishing machines; they lacked finish, and sometimes were the cause of much disaster, but they kept his brain and fingers busy, and prevented him from sharing in some of the others' mischievous scrapes.

Cherry was a little thin, wiry girl, with wistful dark eyes which looked out at the world too earnestly for her own comfort. She threw her heart and soul into everything she did, whether it was right or wrong; and was nervously sensitive as to other people's opinions of her.

Bonnie was the happiest, sunniest little creature that ever frisked this earth. She had flaxen curls and deep blue eyes; her plumpness was perhaps her only trial, for the boys called her "Pudding" and "Fatty." They

once took her to task about her smiling face, assuring her she was a "Cheshire cat, perpetually on the grin."

Bonnie was found afterwards by Mrs. Burton seriously inspecting herself in the bedroom looking-glass. She climbed down from the chair on which she was standing with a wise little nod and a brighter smile than ever.

"Dear God borned me a smiler. He wanted somebody in the world to smile always, all the time, and that's why my lips will turn up!"

Mrs. Burton walked away saying in her heart—

"Thank God for the smilers in the world!"

Bonnie's grammar was uncertain; her heart was big; and there was nobody and nothing that she did not love. The four were very good friends. Their quarrels never lasted long, and they were staunch and true to each other in difficulty or trouble.

The day after the discussion in the nursery, Colonel St. Leger arrived. He did not come till after dark, and the little girls were just going to bed. The greatest excitement arose when a hasty summons was sent from the drawing-room to tell them to come down. Cherry was beside herself with nervousness; she tried valiantly to hide it; the boys were already in the giggling state; Bonnie was the only one who trotted down with her usually placid smile.

"Stacy, go in first," whispered Cherry beseechingly, outside the door.

"Shan't. I know my manners. Men always hang on behind."

"Bonnie, you go! Oh! I wish you weren't so short!"

"Crawl in on all-fours. She'll hide you!" suggested Phil, capering up and down.

And then Mrs. Burton, hearing the whispering voices, threw open the door, and solved the difficulty by taking each little girl by the hand. She was proud of her charges. They were all clean and tidy, in their best clothes, and having been warned beforehand were on their best behaviour. But they were all taken aback when they saw their father.

A pale, languid-looking man enveloped in wraps lay back in Mrs. Burton's best arm-chair. He had a long, drooping moustache, sad eyes, and the softest voice that the children had ever heard.

He looked up as they entered, but seemed too tired to rouse himself.

"They look very strong and well," he said.

He did not offer to kiss them. Cherry, in an agony of indecision and shyness, had found herself lifting up her face for a kiss. She stepped back with scarlet cheeks just as her father bent forward. Bonnie was more fortunate, but then she looked such a baby, and the tickle of the long moustache as it swept her cheek amused her so, that she at once indulged in her little fat chuckle The boys squared their shoulders, and shook hands as if they were working a pump-handle up and down. Colonel St. Leger drew a long breath when the introductions were over.

"I must talk about plans to-morrow," he said slowly.

Then, being conscious that eight bright eyes were fixed on him in earnest scrutiny, he added—

"I shall be better able to talk when I am rested. They do you credit, Mrs. Burton."

Mrs. Burton smiled.

"I am not anxious to lose them."

"No? Well, we will see; I am going to set up a bachelor establishment. Mrs. Tipkins, who has been left in charge at Instanton all this time, will arrange things. But I prefer to have only men-servants about me as in India. I am a thorough bachelor, and my man I have brought home with me will be invaluable. If the place were smaller he would be sufficient in himself."

Bonnie had been standing by her father's side. She put out her little soft hand and laid it on his knee.

"We'll be bachelors, too," she said in her persuasive tone. "We'll be very good, and you'll teach us how."

Bonnie little knew that her touch and words were the means of deciding their fate then and there.

Colonel St. Leger had been weighing matters thoughtfully, and had come to the conclusion that he would rather not have his children with him. He was steeling himself against their bright young faces when the soft baby hand undid it all. Something rose up in his heart and protested against living apart from them; memory took him back to a fair young wife in agony of tears as she laid her youngest in the faithful ayah's arms.

"Take her; a bit of my heart and life goes with her; but I would cut off my right hand to save her precious life. God did not bring her into this world for me to hurry her out of it by my selfishness."

And this was the baby standing by him now; the one whose soft lips had been lifted so caressingly to his, the one who seemed to claim his lot at once as hers, without a shadow of doubt or fear.

He smiled at her now, but said nothing. Mrs. Burton laughed aloud; then, seeing Colonel St. Leger wished

"'They look very strong and well,' he said."

the interview to be short, she bade them wish him good-night and go to bed.

"You stupid silly!" ejaculated Stacy, turning upon Bonnie directly they were outside the door. "You're always so ready to say things, and you always say them wrong!"

"What do you think a bachelor is?" echoed Phil, with his short nose well in the air, "Nothing that a baby like you can ever be."

If Cherry had been the defaulter she would have been covered with shame and confusion. Not so Bonnie. She stood her ground sturdily.

"I'm going to be like father. I don't care what it is, but he is it, and I shall be too. I shall make myself a bachelor, I shall be growed into it!"

Stacy was so overcome by Bonnie's earnestness and emphasis, that he rolled over on the ground trying to stifle his laughter. Phil flung himself on the top of him. The little girls raced upstairs leaving their brothers to fight it out, and it was not until their hair was being brushed by Annie, the bright young nurserymaid, that Bonnie again referred to the subject.

"What is a bachelor, Cherry?"

Cherry had a very vague idea of such a person.

"It's a—a kind of man, I think—something like an uncle."

Annie laughed. "Oh! Miss Cherry, what nonsense! A bachelor be what no man ought to be; he be a set up creature who thinks himself too good for women! A man that is frightened of any woman!"

"I'm sure father isn't afraid of anybody," said Cherry hastily.

"Your father? Eh dear, no; he be no bachelor. A bachelor be a man that never wants to marry."

Bonnie did not understand these explanations. She was crestfallen at the idea that it was something beyond the powers of her attainment.

Colonel St. Leger was again discussed by his children over their breakfast the next morning.

"He's nothing like you said, Stacey. He's ever so much nicer!" Cherry spoke between spoonfuls of porridge.

"I don't know about that," said Stacy, with his grown-up air. "These quiet fellows are rather deep. There's Marcus Bains at our school——"

"Father isn't a fellow," interrupted Cherry.

"Oh, shut up! What is he? And he may be a kind of sleeping lion—you never can tell!"

"We'll tell better when he has unpacked his things," said Phil, with a knowing nod.

"I think," said Cherry decidedly, "he is sleepy and ill and tired, and if we go and live with him we shall be able to do just what we like."

"He won't stand noise, I'm afraid," said Phil. "I hope he is not a molly-coddle."

Mrs. Burton, who presided over the breakfast-table, and who had been deep in her letters, now looked up.

"Boys, are you speaking of your father?"

"Yes," Phil said, unabashed, "we are."

"But don't you know that you must be respectful? Remember this, a father's actions and words must never be questioned. You must honour and obey, and—love him. And every boy and girl ought to think their father the very best man in the whole world."

"But every one's father can't be best," said Phil, who was a born arguer.

"You must think him best. He must be best to you."

"But I like to think true," continued Phil.

Bonnie came to the rescue.

"He's the best father that I has ever had," she said, with warmth, "and I'm going to love him the bestest!"

"How many fathers have you had?" questioned Stacy, with a giggle.

Bonnie was undaunted.

"I may have had lots before I was borned, only I can't remember them."

The boys shouted, and then Phil said gravely: "I'll give you my new shilling, Bonnie, the very first sensible thing you say."

Bonnie beamed at him over her mug of milk.

"And then I'll go and buy that wunnerful doll in the toy-shop that walks by her legs without holding."

"It is time you were off to school, boys," said Mrs. Burton; and the little party broke up.

CHAPTER II

Their New Home

COLONEL ST. LEGER soon arranged his plans. He would take the children with him to Instanton, he said; and he would engage a tutor to come and live in the house and look after them.

"Not a governess," he said, when such a suggestion was made to him by Mrs. Burton. "I don't want a woman in the place, except Mrs. Tipkins, who will be my housekeeper."

"But Cherry and Bonnie must have a nurse or maid," urged Mrs. Burton. "If you dispense with a governess, you cannot dispense with that."

"What is their present nurse like?" asked the Colonel, with a frown.

"A most respectable young girl——"

"Oh, no young girls in my establishment, if you please," was the testy response. "Mrs. Tipkins must see to them, or else get some one suitable. What do they want a nurse for? Cannot they dress themselves?"

"Cherry can, but not Bonnie. They are neither of them big enough to look after themselves."

"It's a pity they are not all boys," muttered the Colonel.

Mrs. Burton, with a sigh, gave in to the inevitable; but she began to load Cherry with so many instructions that her little face looked almost careworn.

"You are the eldest girl, dear, and when you grow older you will have to take your dear mother's place, and be mistress of your father's house. I want you to try to be as helpful and useful as you can. I am afraid I have spoilt you by letting you do so little for yourself. I remember my eldest sister, when only a couple of years older than you are, used always to mend her brother's socks and stockings. You can sew very nicely, and you must try and keep yourself and Bonnie tidy; and never let the boys come to meals with dirty hands and faces. Be gentle and kind with them, and remind them of the training I have tried to give them. You may be a great blessing and comfort to your father, Cherry, if you like. Only you must learn to be unselfish, and think of pleasing others before yourself."

"Oh, I will, I will!" cried Cherry earnestly, as she clasped her little hands nervously together; "and I won't mind if the boys laugh at me, and I will always comb my hair right through, however much it hurts; and I'll try and not tread my shoes down at the heels."

Poor little Cherry! The future lay before her like a black cloud. She could not bear strangers; and she was going to a strange home with no one to whom she could turn if the full agony of shyness came upon her.

"Oh," she cried to herself when in bed that night, "I am to take care of all the others; but who will take care of me?"

It was no wonder that her eyes grew big with plaintive sadness and fright. She never spoke of her fears, and Mrs. Burton had no idea of the doubt and dread in her little heart.

Colonel St. Leger did not stay many days with Dr. Burton. He, with his faithful man "Goff," went down to his country house almost directly. The children were to follow a fortnight later. They were bitterly disappointed that their father had brought them no presents. With the exception of Bonnie, Colonel St. Leger had failed in gaining their affections; but he hardly saw them, and, when he did, seemed to have nothing to say to them.

Mrs. Burton did not talk to them of the tutor. The boys were under the impression that they would attend school there; and she did not undeceive them.

When the last day came, they were all in a most excited state, and in desperation Mrs. Burton turned the boys into the garden whilst she superintended the packing. She intended to take them down herself and see them thoroughly settled into their new home, but her heart was heavy, and she tried not to think of the blank they would leave in her household.

"Cherry," she said, turning to the little girls, who were following her about from room to room, and rather hindering her than helping; "will you take Bonnie into the drawing-room and look at some picture-books there? Don't join the boys, and don't get into mischief. I will come down very soon to you, and then we will have a nice talk together."

The children went, but their tongues were busy, and the books were unheeded. They settled themselves on

the deep window-seat overlooking the principal street in the town.

"Will father unpack us?" Bonnie asked anxiously. "Will he be able to tie my pinafores behind without getting my curls catched?"

"I'm going to do everything for everybody," said Cherry a little grandly. "And you'll all have to do what I tell you, because I'm father's eldest daughter."

"Not Stacy and Phil! They telled me we would run in and out, and up and down, and all over everywheres, because it was country we was going to; and everybodies does what they like in the country!"

Cherry shook her head.

"I'm not to do a single thing that I like; auntie said so."

Bonnie looked up with her chuckling laugh.

"But auntie didn't mean that."

"Yes. I've got to take care of you—all of you!"

A deep sigh followed.

Bonnie was pursuing a very lazy fly round and round the window-pane with her finger.

"Dear God takes care of us. We arsks Him every day. Oh, Cherry, isn't he a little darling? do you think he would like a kiss?"

She was holding the fly in her little palm and regarding it with loving gaze.

"Don't be cruel, Bonnie; let him go!"

A voice behind them startled them.

"Well, little maidens, what is your treasure?"

They turned, and the captured fly escaped in delight. A tall clergyman stood looking at them with some amusement. Cherry knew him at once. He was the

new curate of the parish church. He had taken a children's service the Sunday before, and she found herself with delight understanding all he said. This was his first call.

Bonnie put up her face for a kiss, which was promptly given her; then she trotted out of the room to call "Auntie!"

Cherry stood shyly in front of him, and was relieved when Mrs. Burton appeared; but Mr. Clark put his arm round her, and drew her to him.

"And what is your name?"

"Cherry," she whispered.

"It is not her baptismal name," said Mrs. Burton smiling; "that is Christobel. Her mother had just planted a small cherry-tree at the time of her birth, and it was she who gave her the nickname."

"You must be a fruitful cherry-tree," said Mr. Clark, looking at her with a smile; "not a cumberer of the ground. There are too many cumberers in God's garden."

Cherry looked up at him questioningly, but could say nothing.

"That is what I am telling her," said Mrs. Burton. "She is going away from me with her brothers and sister; and I tell her she must be a little mother to them."

"Cherries must be sweet," said Mr. Clark, "and smooth; they don't prick people, like gooseberries! And I like cherries that are as good as they look; not those nasty sour things that make your mouth water till you taste them, and then make you wish to empty a sugar basin down your throat to take away their taste."

Cherry smiled.

Mr. Clark continued: "You make up your mind to have a lot of fruit. And if you want a Bible lesson for a rainy Sunday, look up some of the trees God tells you about, and don't forget the solemn lesson we are taught about cumberers."

Then he turned to talk to Mrs. Burton, and Cherry slipped out of the room. What *was* a cumberer? she wondered. What kind of tree was it? She had never heard the name before.

She asked the boys a little later. Stacy answered promptly.

"A cumberer? Oh, it means a clumsy-fisted creature."

Cherry pondered deeply.

"But it's something to do with a garden," she said.

"Oh, you mean a cucumber—those things that look like green eels! You are a stupid not to know a cucumber!"

Cherry shook her head.

"I'm sure it's a cumberer I mean. It's in the Bible. I'll look for it."

But she could not do it that day; and the next they all travelled down to Instanton under charge of Mrs. Burton. The children never forgot the first sight of their new home. It was a lovely spring afternoon when they arrived at the little country station. A very shabby fly drove them through green lanes bordered by budding elms, and when they turned in at some iron gates, the drive up to Instanton Manor was between buttercup meadows. The house, an old brick building, was nearly covered with green creepers, and a spacious lawn stretched down on one side to a fir plantation. The boys nudged each other delightedly. Cherry looked out with anxious eyes.

They were met on the doorstep by Mrs. Tipkins, who looked a little heated and nervous. She was a tall, angular woman with red cheeks, and an old black lace cap with red ribbons hung over one side of her head. Mrs. Tipkins never could keep her caps straight; perhaps it was because she had so little hair underneath them. The children looked at her with awestruck eyes. She wore a black silk dress, and made a low bow to Mrs. Burton as she came up the steps holding Bonnie by the hand.

"I'm very pleased to see you, mem, and the young ladies and gentlemen—and the Colonel does not wish to be disturbed till he has finished his afternoon nap, and I will take you to your rooms."

The hall was a low, broad one, and the stairs were old carved oak, with many a crook and turn. There was a long gallery at the top, with six windows looking out over wooded country and hills, and rooms opened into it on the other side. The bedrooms were all pleasant, sunny rooms, but had an unused appearance; a large square one in the centre was to be the children's schoolroom.

"This is away from the Colonel's apartments, and he will not hear the noise," said Mrs. Tipkins, looking at the boys nervously as she spoke.

Mrs. Burton had her hands full that evening; for she was leaving early the next morning, and she had much to talk over with Mrs. Tipkins and arrange. A young girl about sixteen, Mrs. Tipkin's niece, was to wait on the little girls. The rest of the establishment consisted of "Goff," the Colonel's man; Abercrombie, the old gardener; and Sam, the odd boy. Mrs. Tipkins did the

cooking herself with the help of a woman from the village. She listened to Mrs. Burton's many suggestions with an anxious face.

"I will do my very best, mem. I remember their dear mother, and she was a sweet young lady; but the Colonel is a gentleman who likes no trouble, and I wish a lady was in the house. I do not understand children. I know they are always noisy, and I am afraid I shall not be able to keep them quiet."

The children did not see their father at all that night. He was not well, they were told. When Cherry was in bed Mrs. Burton came and sat down by her with a heavy heart; but she tried to look cheerful.

"You will try and do just as you have always done with me, Cherry dear. Remember prayers and Bible-reading. Never forget that. Read to Bonnie every morning until she is able to do it herself. Try and please others before yourself, and never forget you are the eldest girl, and must grow up to be a help and a comfort to your father."

Cherry nodded with big eyes and a puckered brow, and then Mrs. Burton put her arms round her, and they had a little cry together.

"If anything very dreadful happens, Cherry, you can write to me, you know."

"But if it happens every day?" queried Cherry, settling down to thoughts of the very worst.

"Oh, but it won't, darling. And God will take care of you. You must tell Him all your little troubles."

And then she kissed her again and went away, and Cherry fell asleep, to dream of nameless horrors that always hovered over her when she was tired and excited.

Mrs. Burton had already left the house before the children were awake the next morning. Cherry woke up to find Bonnie already chattering to Nettie, their new maid, who had come to dress them. Somehow or other, the sunshiny morning, the singing of birds outside the window, and the sweet yellow jasmine tapping against the panes, all helped to clear away the clouds from Cherry's face.

She was not an old woman, but a happy child; and Bonnie's ceaseless chatter took her out of herself and her anxieties.

They went into the schoolroom, where breakfast was already laid. The boys were there, and for a moment they looked helplessly at each other. Was no one coming to sit at the head of the table? Nettie had brought in the tea and four boiled eggs, and had then left the room. There was no bread-and-butter cut; no one to say grace.

"This is stunning!" said Stacy. "You'll have to pour out tea, Cherry, and I'll cut the loaf. Hurrah for liberty!"

Cherry took her seat with some importance.

"We'll say grace first," she said, "like we always do. It's your turn, Phil, to-day."

Phil covered his eyes with his hand and said it reverently, though a little hastily.

"I'll have four lumps of sugar, Cherry. Here! Pass the basin."

Cherry pursed up her lips.

"I'll give you two. Auntie said we must do just the same here as at home."

Phil grumbled, and looked meditatively at the basin

as if he were going to snatch it. Bonnie turned his thoughts elsewhere.

"I'm going to wish father good-morning after breakfast. I told his soldier man I would. I like him; he buttoned my shoe that wouldn't button in the passage just now, and he smiles so big!"

"Not as big a grin as yours," said Phil. "Don't you go near father; you'll only do something stupid, and we want to have a jolly good day without him."

"He will have prayers, won't he?" asked Cherry.

"It's my belief he sleeps all day," said Stacy, with decision. "As long as we don't wake him up we shall be all right!"

"But who will have prayers, then?"

"Oh, shut up, Cherry! It's only grown-up people who do that sort of thing."

But Cherry always stuck to her point.

"Auntie said I must see that we did everything exactly like home, and *I* can't take prayers."

"I think I could if I could read," said Bonnie. "It's only reading out of a book to dear God, isn't it?"

Cherry shook her head and said no more. The boys were not long over their breakfast, and then tore out of doors as fast as their legs could carry them. The little girls were preparing to follow them, when Nettie brought a message to say that their father wished to see them; and Cherry, ill at ease, took Bonnie's hand and stepped softly into a darkened room on the ground floor.

Colonel St. Leger was lying on a couch near the half-open window. His feet were covered with a tiger-skin, which at first sight looked rather alarming. He held

out his hand to them both. Bonnie insisted upon kissing him, and Cherry timidly followed her example.

"Sit down," he said in a soft, mellow voice; "I want to speak to you."

"And so does we," said Bonnie, with her happy little nod.

"Your tutor arrives this evening. You must tell your brothers. I expect him to see to everything, and you are to obey him implicitly."

Cherry stared at him bewilderedly.

"I don't know who he is," she murmured.

"His name is Leonard Hastings—Mr. Hastings you must call him. He will teach you lessons and look after you generally."

The Colonel spoke slowly, then noticed Cherry's eyes of terror.

"What is it?" he asked.

"He will be another strange man," she said, with a little choke in her voice.

The Colonel smiled. "You don't like strangers. Come here."

Cherry obeyed. Her father put his hand under her chin and raised her face to his, looking at her very scrutinisingly.

"Am I a stranger?"

Cherry's heart beat fast, but she was very truthful.

"Yes."

"And are you afraid of strangers? Are you afraid of me?"

Cherry little knew how much hung upon her answer. She looked at her father steadily; something in his eyes fascinated her; and then an impulse which she hardly

"Am I a stranger?"

understood made her put her two little arms round his neck.

"I shall not be afraid—now!" she whispered.

He put his hand on her head.

"Good child!" was all that he said, but from that moment he was enshrined in Cherry's heart as an object of adoration and love.

CHAPTER III

Their Tutor

"DO lesson with girls! I should think we wouldn't!" "Have a man-governess after our heels all day!"

"And no other fellows to learn with, or play with. Why, what is he thinking of?"

"Of course we shall go to school! I never heard such rot!"

"I'll go straight to father, and tell him we won't stand it!"

"He must think us a couple of babies!"

Cherry stood abashed before the boys' anger when she told her news.

"Why did he funk telling us?" asked Stacy, who felt injured that Cherry had been summoned to give them the information.

"Let's tell him we won't stand it!" said Phil, and away the two boys raced across the green lawn and into the house, where they finally tumbled into the arms of Goff.

"We want to see father."

Goff was a tall, thin man, with an ugly though pleasant

face. His smile, as Bonnie had remarked, was a big one.

"Heyday, young masters, but ye can't. The Colonel is not to be disturbed."

"But we *must*. Tell him it is important business."

"*Most* important, and we can't wait a minute."

The boyish voices were earnest and shrill, and penetrated into the darkened room.

A small silver gong was sounded, and Goff darted in. He came out in a minute.

'The Colonel will see you, sirs."

Once inside their father's room the boys did not feel so brave. He was still on his couch, and his voice was as low and gentle as it had been to his little daughters.

"Come in, boys. Good morning. I heard you were wanting to see me. I am not well to-day, so am keeping quiet. I must beg you to keep quiet, too, whilst you are indoors."

There was a pause. Phil gave Stacy a nudge, and Stacy began to get rather red as he stuttered out—

"Cherry has been saying some fellow is coming to-day, and we're to do lessons with her and Bonnie. We're schoolboys; we couldn't do it! They're girls—babies!"

The Colonel fixed his eye on his eldest son, and Stacy began to wriggle from one foot to the other.

"We thought she must have made a mess of the message," he explained.

Still that look and not a word.

Auguring well from his father's silence, Phil struck in boldly—

"You see, father, you've been in India, and you don't

know what English boys do. They never learn with girls—*never!*"

"We might as well play with dolls," said Stacy, gathering courage.

Then the Colonel spoke, but his voice, though it was just as gentle, was as inflexible as iron.

"If I saw fit for you to play with dolls you should do it."

There was dead silence.

"Cherry gave you my message quite correctly. I will send for you when I want you. Goff, show the young gentlemen out."

Stacy and Phil felt very small indeed when they were once more in the garden.

"I thought he was rather soft," said Phil, with tones of regret in his voice.

Stacy could say nothing for a minute. He only shook his head ruefully.

"It's no go," he said. "He will be getting us cradles to sleep in next, and we should have to get into them too!"

Phil began to laugh; and when Phil started laughing it was very infectious. Stacy joined him; their grievances melted away, and they raced off towards the farm buildings near to reconnoitre the premises.

Meanwhile Cherry and Bonnie were making friends with the gardener. He was a short, sturdy old man, with very thick eyebrows that gave his face a fierce look, but he was very civil to them.

He was mowing a bit of the lawn, and Bonnie went over to a bit of grass that had not yet been cut. Dancing over it she exclaimed—

"Oh, Cherry, what dear little daisies and buttercups! How they must be wanting to pull themselves right up through the earth and run round after me! How tired they must get of keeping still! Why doesn't dear God give the flowers feet to run about?"

"You would never be able to pick them if they could run away from you," said Cherry wisely.

Bonnie sat down on the grass to do one of her "thinks," as she termed it. Abercrombie looked at her with a strange light in his eyes.

"Ay, lassie, never speer aboot th' A'mighty's dealins. The flowers do wi'oot feet and ye do wi'oot roots."

"Yes," said Bonnie, looking up with her big blue eyes; "did you plant them here, gardener? When were they borned? Before I was?"

"Na, na, the daisies an' buttercups be not my plantin'."

"Did dear God plant them?"

Abercrombie nodded.

Bonnie looked down at the mown grass and decapitated flowers with sorrow.

"You shouldn't cut off dear God's flowers. Did He tell you to do it?"

The old man looked at her thoughtfully; then he shook his head.

"Ye be yer mither's bairn surely. Wull ye coom wi' me, an' I will be shewin' ye young leddies what yer mither did?"

The little girls followed him willingly. He led them through a little iron gate along a path bordered by primroses and violets, with tall shrubs and trees in the background, and they presently came to an open space

with a green grassy bank and a patch of mossy turf. A rustic seat was on the bank, and through a gap in the trees a most beautiful view of the distant country could be seen.

"Before your mither went to Indy she used to ca' this her wild garden. She would only have Natur's flowers, an' naebody were to touch it but her ain self. She would coom an' sit, and sit, an' put up her han' if I but just cam' along to give her a message. 'Hush! I'm listenin' to a blackbird,' she wad say. Do ye see the wee bits o' trees in the middle of the turf, young leddies?"

Cherry had been looking at them already. Four small trees stretched in a row right across the grass. The old gardener touched them reverently.

"This wee pear-tree were planted when Master Eustace were born; yer mither did it wi' her ain hands. This wee apple-tree she planted when Master Philip were born, an' this wee cherry-tree when Miss Christobel were born, just afore she went away to Indy."

"And who planted my tree?" asked Bonnie breathlessly.

"Ye see, ye were born in Indy, but I thought t'were a peety not to have the four trees, so I just pit a sma' ploom-tree in, an' it have doon verra weel."

Bonnie hung over her tree admiringly.

"I like to have a tree just so old as I am," she said.

Cherry was looking at her tree with wistful eyes.

"I wish I could remember mother," she said. "I like her garden best of all. We will often come and play here, won't we, Bonnie?"

They ran away then, and found the boys. For the

next hour they were having a delightful game of "hide-and-seek" in the old garden.

Dinner came too soon. They sat down to it with large appetites, and their talk was much about the coming tutor.

"If he is a prig I shall have nothing to do with him," said Stacy grandly. "Unless he is A1 at cricket I shall hate him—I know I shall!"

"He will wear glasses," said Phil. "Why do muffs always wear them? I hate a fellow who can't see his own nose!"

"I can't see mine," said Bonnie, going through contortions in her endeavour to do so.

"Will he have a cane?" said Cherry, trying to speak valiantly.

"Oh, of course. You will get plenty of whacks, and so will Bonnie if she turns her eyes inside out as she is doing now."

Bonnie stopped her evolutions with a start.

"I thinks," she said meditatively, "that he may keep sweets in his pocket."

"You wait till you see him. He feeds on nothing but books and ink, and his pockets are crammed with sums! He'll keep you in order!"

Threats were always lost on Bonnie. She only smiled serenely.

"I likes mens," was her remark.

When dinner was over away scampered the boys into the garden again. Bonnie trotted upstairs to find her favourite doll—a battered old waxen treasure called "Dinah"—and Cherry suddenly bethought herself of the word she wanted to discover in her Bible.

She went in search of it, and sitting down on the schoolroom floor, for a long time toiled over it in vain.

At last, with a sigh, she tucked it under her arm, and went downstairs, hoping that some one might help her. Abercrombie was training a creeper just outside the garden door.

"Do you know, please," she asked, "where the Bible tells about a cumberer?"

The old man's eyes sparkled.

"Ay, that I do, lassie!" he said. "Be ye wantin' to discover it? Han' ower the gran' old Book, then, an' Abercrombie wull show ye."

He turned the leaves rapidly till he came to the thirteenth chapter of St. Luke's Gospel.

Cherry took it from him eagerly, and sitting on the stone doorstep was soon quite absorbed in it.

Abercrombie looked at the little figure with the same expression of face that he had looked at Bonnie in the morning, when she sat amongst the daisies. But he said nothing. He was Scotch, and very silent.

At last Cherry looked up.

"Was the fig-tree a cumberer?" she asked.

"Ay, surely; takin' up ground an' growin' nothin'."

"And that is what a cumberer means?"

"It be just a crittur of God's makin', that be not fulfillin' the purpose o' his Creator."

"I don't understand."

Cherry's face was alive with feeling and earnestness.

"An unfruitful tree," repeated the gardener; "no good to his ain self or onnybody else."

The little girl shut her Bible up and went into the house with it. She shook off her serious thoughts and

ran away to play with the boys. She found them climbing trees, and this delightful occupation commended itself immediately to her. She was fleet and nimble of foot, and was soon vieing with them as to who should go the highest.

A fly with luggage driving up to the house brought them down with full speed to the ground. They raced across the lawn, then stopped short as they saw their father seated smoking in the verandah speaking to the newcomer. Bonnie was standing by the Colonel's side smiling seraphically at the young man.

Colonel St. Leger beckoned to the boys, and Cherry came up behind them, wishing she had not torn her pinafore nor lost her hat.

"These are your pupils, Hastings," the Colonel said; "I do not know whether they are backward or forward in learning. I know nothing about them, and, as I have told you, I expect you to have full control over them."

Here his eye wandered to the dishevelled state of the three tree climbers, and he frowned a little.

"You have not come a day too soon," he added, "for they have no one to look after them at present."

Mr. Hastings turned round and shook hands with the boys. Cherry crept behind a stone pillar, gazing at him curiously.

He was a plain-featured, sandy-haired young man, with no spectacles, and with a pleasant, kindly look in his grey eyes. His length and breadth of limb had a wholesome effect on the boys, but it frightened Cherry. He spoke brightly and briskly, and was a great contrast to the Colonel, whose tones were always slow and languid.

As he turned away to follow his luggage indoors, Bonnie patted her father's hand to attract his attention.

"I s'pose it's the lesson-books makes him so big," she said confidentially; "they must be very stuffy eating!'

The boys giggled and ran away. Cherry crept after them; but Bonnie stood her ground.

"The boys say he eats lessons and drinks ink, father," she explained.

"The boys talk unmitigated nonsense!"

"So they does! And he couldn't drink ink, could he? It would turn him black!"

She wriggled herself in between her father's knees, and continued gazing out into the sunny garden as she spoke.

"The gardener showed us mother's garden and our little trees; he cuts dear God's daisies and buttercups and deads them. And God planted them Himself, the gardener didn't—I've been telling Dinah about it. Do you know Dinah? She was painted black once with blacking—Phil did it—but Cherry and I scraped her back again to white. Will the new lesson man teach me how to make her frocks? Cherry tried to one day, but she pricked her finger and it bleeded, and then we used the frock to wipe up auntie's medicine that we spilt—we was giving it to the black cat, you know and she spit at us!"

This was a specimen of Bonnie's conversation. She had no doubt it was deeply interesting to her father; and he certainly did not seem in a hurry to get rid of her. Cherry upstairs, brushing her hair, changing her pinafore, and making herself generally tidy, was longing for her little sister's society. She felt this long, strange

day would never end, and the advent of Mr. Hastings filled her with awe. Presently she slipped into the schoolroom where Nettie was laying the tea. She got up on the broad window-seat, and tucking her legs underneath her, looked out into the sunny garden below with real home-sickness and longing for "auntie."

Her thoughts flew to the story of the fruitless fig-tree. "Poor tree!" she mused. "I wonder if it did do better, or if it was cut down after all? the Bible doesn't say. I wonder if I'm a cumberer? The clergyman said I might be one. I—I expect I am. The gardener said it was being no good to anybody, and I haven't been of any good to anybody to-day, I'm sure. I've torn myself up a tree, and auntie wouldn't like that. I shall be sorry if I am a cumberer."

Tears fell. She brushed them away hastily, feeling more and more miserable; and then, pressing her hot little face against the cool glass, she tried to reason herself into cheerfulness again.

"P'raps Mr. Hastings will have prayers. That has made me feel wicked all day, because we ought to have had them this morning. I know we ought. And I shan't have to look after the boys if he is here. Oh, I do hope he will be nice!"

She started and turned round. The subject of her thoughts was entering the room.

"Hullo, little woman! You here all alone? I was told I could get a cup of tea here. Where are your brothers?"

Cherry looked frightened.

"I don't know," she said.

"We must have a bell rung for them."

He left the room, and gave the order to Nettie. Coming back his quick eyes saw the tear-stains on Cherry's face.

"You have a pretty home," he said cheerfully, coming to the window and looking out. "I hear that you only came here yesterday. Do you like it?"

Cherry nodded; then truthfulness compelled her to add, "Only a little."

"It is strange to you, isn't it?"

Cherry hardly heard what he said. She was morbidly conscientious, and the matter of family prayers was really troubling her. Now was her opportunity, if she could get it out.

She spoke jerkily, with a crimson flush mounting to her forehead.

"Will you have prayers in the morning like auntie did?"

Mr. Hastings looked rather surprised, but he spoke quite naturally.

"Oh yes, I suppose so, if it is the usual thing. I did in London with my last pupils. You must let me tell you about them. Ah, here come the boys! Now let us have some tea."

Mr. Hastings and Bonnie were the only ones at perfect ease through that meal; but he charmed the boys by his funny stories, and Bonnie added her quaint remarks to them; so that they began to feel more at home. Before the evening was over Stacy announced in his final tone—

"He isn't half a bad sort of fellow, and if he's as good a cricketer as he makes out, he'll do!"

CHAPTER IV

Their Cousin

IT was astonishing how soon the little St. Legers settled down into their new life. They saw very little of their father, and Mr. Hastings found himself obliged to solve every domestic difficulty. Bonnie was the only one who had free access to her father's room; her constant formula now was, "Me and father thinks," etc., and the boys could not crush her by their sarcastic remarks. Cherry was an enigma to her tutor. Sometimes tearing about with the boys, a little wild, daring creature, apparently without a care or thought; sometimes crouched up in some quiet corner of the house or garden, looking the picture of anxiety and despair. She was quick at her lessons, and gave no trouble in the schoolroom. Bonnie only appeared for an hour or so in the morning. She was a real trial to the young man. He had never taught so small a child before, and could not understand her. Lessons with the boys were more to his liking. They went on steadily from nine to twelve, and two to four every day, with the exception of Saturday, when only two hours' work was done in the

morning. Mr. Hastings was with his pupils for every meal. At eight o'clock he dined with the Colonel; the little girls were then in bed, and the boys were supposed to follow half an hour later. The rest of the evening the tutor had to himself, and, on the whole, he enjoyed his life. The only two members of the household who heartily disliked each other, and with whom was constant friction, were Abercrombie and Goff.

Their nationalities had much to do with it—Goff's extraction was Irish, Abercrombie's Scotch, and long and excited discussions were held between them on matters political and personal. The boys delighted in pitting them one against the other. "A.B.C.," as they nicknamed the old gardener, was perhaps the bitterest in spirit.

"They be all the same," said he, with an ominous sniff, when Goff had delivered some message from his master in a light and airy tone. "For stabeelity o' purpose an' raal true power o' brain, they be unco' wantin'! 'Tis a flippitty laugh here, an' a wrigglin' out o' responsibeelity there, an' a dancin' through life wi'oot breakin' the crust thereof; an' as for truth an' righteousness, they be as far from it as the east be from the west!"

"Goff," said Phil, "do you know what A.B.C. thinks of you?"

"An' sure I do, Master Phil. 'Tis a fool ontoirely he'll be makin' me! But sorra meself would I be, to be sich a long-faced wooden-headed figure for iver pullin' the lips together in case a joke might widen 'em!"

Goff was, of course, the favourite with the boys. When not attending on his master, he would tell them

the most entrancing jungle tales that they had ever heard; and he was always in a good temper, and ready to do anything he could for the "young masters."

But Cherry liked the old gardener. She and Bonnie were always in the little enclosure that they called "Mother's garden," and the old man loved to see them there.

One afternoon they had been playing with their dolls, when Abercrombie came on the scene.

He was stooping to look at the small cherry-tree, when Cherry said—

"Will there be cherries on it soon, do you think?"

He shook his head doubtfully.

"I canna mak' it out. It hath ne'er borne fruit yet, an' the apple an' pear are doing verra weel indeed, even the ploom tree bore last autumn; but ne'er a blossom or a cherry have coom to this little tree."

"Has it never had cherries?" questioned Cherry anxiously.

"Never," was the solemn reply. "But may be 'twill coom one day!"

The little girls were having a delightful wash of their dolls' clothes in a small stream that trickled by, but when Abercrombie had passed, Cherry jumped up exclaiming—

"I'm tired of washing, Bonnie; I'm going to sit on mother's seat. I want to think."

"And I'll wash Dinah now," said Bonnie cheerfully. "I will bathe her in the sea, and nearly drown her!"

Cherry sat down to her thoughts. How was it she always had such sad ones now? she dimly wondered. She almost wished she had never been told about

cumberers. Here was her dear little tree a real cumberer, and in an inexplicable fashion she identified it with herself. She was a cumberer, of course, for her tree was one. Stacy, Phil, and Bonnie all were bearing fruit.

"I wonder if God could possibly alter us," she said, looking up into the blue sky above her. "How I wish I knew how to grow fruit! It seems to be doing good to some one. I wonder who I could do good to, and how I could do it! I know giving poor people money and food and clothes is doing good, but I don't know any poor people—not really ragged, miserable ones; and if I did, I have nothing to give them. I wish I could ask some one about it."

She turned at last to Bonnie.

"Bonnie, how can we be good?"

Bonnie turned at her sister's voice. Her curls were dripping with water, her pinafore splashed with the same.

She sat down on the grass to consider, and folded her fat chubby arms in imitation of her father.

"We must be like the darling little angels," she said emphatically.

"We can't be like them, because we're not in heaven! And it isn't being good I mean, it's doing good—we must do something."

"Go without sugar and put it in the mission'ry box," suggested Bonnie promptly; "that's what auntie used to do when she was a little girl."

"She didn't put the sugar in the box, it was money," corrected Cherry. "I don't really think you can do good without money, and no one seems to give us any here."

She got up with a sigh, and sauntered away.

At tea that evening she found courage to broach the subject to Mr. Hastings. "What is the easiest way to do good, please?" she asked.

"You're going to be a prig, Cherry; mind your P's and Q's and do what I tell you *always*," said Stacy, speaking with his mouth full of bread and jam.

"Invent a machine to fly with," said Phil—"at least"—hastily correcting himself—"that wouldn't be the easiest way of doing good, but it would be a stunning thing to do."

"Explain yourself a little further, Cherry," said Mr. Hastings, looking at her kindly.

"I don't mean being good," said Cherry; "something better—doing somebody or something good."

"Well, look here: I was wanting to give you each an essay to write to-morrow. How would it be to take that subject—'Being good, and doing good'? Find out all you can about it; think it out, and write it down?"

The boys made grimaces.

"It's only Cherry's rot. Give us something else."

"No, we'll stick to this. Men want goodness quite as much as women; perhaps more."

"Cherry, come here, and let me punch your head," said Stacy, after tea was over and Mr. Hastings had left the room. "We're not going to have you choosing what lessons we shall do at tea-time!"

"I didn't choose them," said Cherry, edging towards the door. There was a rush at her, a scamper downstairs, and by the time pursuer and pursued had got half-way across the garden, they had forgotten the origin of the chase.

But the next afternoon found them silently writing their essays under Mr. Hastings' keen and watchful eye. When the papers were finished, their tutor read them aloud.

This was Stacy's :—

"*Goodness. On being good, and doing good.*

"A.B.C. says no one is good, but 'every man is vile.' So it does not seem any use writing about it, so I will go on to my second subject which is doing good. Goff says it is doing a good turn to your neighbour, and he knew a man who lost his father and gave his last loaf of bread to a beggar, and the beggar turned out to be his father, who was a miser, and who had a heap of money in the bank; so he told his son who he was, and that he might have the money as a reward, and then he died, and the son lived happy ever after. That is the way to do good. And some people build hospitals, and some set slaves free, and fighting a fellow who is a bully and a mean sneak is doing good, and this is the way I mean to do it.

"Eustace St. Leger."

Mr. Hastings made no remark on this, but went on to Phil's.

"*Goodness. On being good, and doing good.*

"Eustace has got his essay all from A.B.C. and Goff, which is not fair. Grown-up people talk of goodness; they can be good very easily, for they can always do what they like, and have to obey nobody. If you want to be good, you must sit on a chair in a room with the door shut. You must keep your feet from kicking, and you must read a Sunday book. If you keep on at this

all day, you cannot do anything wrong. To do good is more difercult. Doctors do most good in the world, and clergymen. I mean to do good by invenshuns. I am making one now. It is a kind of spring trap that takes food to your mouth, if you happen to have no hands. This is all.

"PHILIP ST. LEGER."

Then Cherry's came, and her little face flushed crimson as Mr. Hastings read it out.

"*Goodness. On being good, and doing good.*

"It is very hard to be good. God is good, and He wants us to be good too, but we forget to be good. He does not want people and trees in His garden if they do no good. The best way is to get some money and do good with it. Do not spend it on sweets. If you have no money it is very hard, for you have nothing to do good with. Mrs. Tipkins told me that mother always did good where she went. She used to visit sick people. I shall do this when I grow up. Children cannot do good, but I think they can be a little good if they try very hard.

"CHERRY ST. LEGER."

"Very fairly written, all of them," said Mr. Hastings. "As I haven't written an essay, I think I will give you mine in a few words. You must *be* good, before you *do* any real good. Remember this, because it will save you a lot of trouble when you get older. Being good is having your heart right; doing good follows naturally. A kind word and look does more good sometimes than giving a hundred pounds away in charity. And every child can do good by trying to please others before

themselves. Ask God above to help you to be good and do good every day of your lives. I am not going to preach a sermon, so I shall say no more."

Cherry listened with open mouth to her tutor's words. She went to bed that night with the firm resolve to please everybody she came across the next day, and she got up the next morning feeling in a very virtuous frame of mind. But just as lessons were commencing something happened which entirely put aside her good intentions. This was a summons from her father to his room. Bonnie brought the message.

"Father wants you quite d'reckly, Cherry. Goff has gone away to see his brother, and me and father thinks it will be drefful without him."

Cherry slipped into her father's room with a palpitating heart. She often envied Bonnie her assurance in pattering in and out of that sacred room without a tremor. She had not seen much of her father yet; and still looked upon him as a being to be reverenced and worshipped.

He was on his couch by the window in an Eastern-looking dressing-gown.

"Come here, Cherry; I want to speak to you."

Cherry advanced a little shyly.

"Now listen. I have received a letter from a lady who says she is going to call on me this morning before lunch. I never see any visitors at such a time, and shall not be able to see her. She is a cousin of mine, and wants to see you and Bonnie. So Mr. Hastings will have to excuse your lessons this morning. You can sit in the drawing-room with her, and take her into the garden, but you are not to bring her near my room, and

tell her I am not well enough to see anybody to-day. Entertain her nicely, but keep her away from me. Do you understand?"

If Cherry had been ten years older, she might have done so. As it was she was terror-stricken. Was this one of the things that she, as her father's eldest daughter, would have to do?

But she bravely stifled her fears.

"Yes, father. When will she come?"

"I don't know. Anna was always erratic. She may be here any minute. Can you get my newspaper off that table? That's it. Now leave me; run out into the garden, and directly she arrives give her my message. Say I am sorry I am not well enough to see her to-day. It is most unlucky Goff should be away."

Cherry took Bonnie by the hand, and went out to the broad stone steps outside the hall door. She sat down in the sun there and waited, wondering how she could talk to a grown-up person whom she had never seen. She began to prepare her conversation beforehand.

"Bonnie, do you remember what auntie used to say first of all to ladies who came to see her? Didn't she say, 'It is a very fine day'?"

"I expect she did," assented Bonnie cheerfully. "Dear God is hotting the sun this morning, isn't He? How does He make it so hot, Cherry? Does he cook it by a fire? My legs are quite tickling with it; let us get into the cool."

"And then auntie would say, 'All well at home, I hope?' Oh, Bonnie, I hope I shan't forget how to speak!"

"I'll speak for you, and tell her lots."

They had not to wait long. A smart carriage and pair soon drove up the drive. A footman got down, and came up the steps. He was about to ring the bell, when Cherry stopped him.

"Father is sorry he isn't able to see you," she said confusedly; "he isn't well."

The footman looked down at her a little superciliously. He put out his hand to the bell, when a shrill voice from the carriage stopped him; and the next minute the door opened, and a very stout lady came bustling up the steps.

"That will do, John. My dears, give me a kiss. I have been so astonished with your father's extraordinary conduct, that I have come in person to see how things are going. Eustace always was queer, but this beats anything he did in the old days. Now, which are you? Christobel and Louisa, I suppose? Where is your father? Take me to him at once. I only got home from Paris last night, so I have not lost much time in coming. How he can have established himself and his family down here without any reference to us, I can't imagine! I suppose everything is at sixes and sevens."

She talked without stopping, till she had got inside the drawing-room. Cherry gravely took a seat opposite her, and waited for her to finish. Then she remarked, with wonderful composure—

"It is a very fine day to-day."

The speech which cost poor Cherry so much, sounded like calm audacity in the ears of her visitor.

"Mercy! What are you children coming to, I wonder! Have you no servants here? Who looks after you? Now either bring your father to me, or take me to him."

"Father says," said Cherry, slipping off her chair in her nervousness and excitement—"he says he is not well enough to see you to-day, and he is sorry."

"What is the matter with him? What doctor is attending him? Dear, dear, he must want a woman to look after things! Where is your father? Who is nursing him? Show me his room!"

Cherry's eyes grew big with fright; but Bonnie came to her rescue—

"Father telled Cherry she wasn't to bring you near his room; he telled us to talk to you. He doesn't see nobody when he's in his dressing-gown, except me and Goff. And he saw Cherry this morning because he wanted to tell her of you."

"And father can't see you," repeated Cherry, more firmly.

Mrs. Crawford, for such was her name, looked distinctly annoyed. She had never been accustomed to be treated so cavalierly, and to be withstood by two such tiny children astonished and perplexed her.

She was heated with her drive, and perturbed by her welcome; and now untied her bonnet-strings, gazing about her restlessly, whilst she considered what to do.

There was a pause. Cherry, in agony of mind, thought it her duty to make the next remark.

"Are all well at home?" she asked.

Mrs. Crawford turned her eyes upon her with interest.

"Are you five, or fifty, I wonder?" she said, a queer little smile coming to her lips. "Well, as Eustace is determined not to see me to-day, I shall take the liberty of looking over his house. Who manages you all here?"

Cherry's face was crimson. What was wrong with her

remarks that this strange lady ignored them so, she wondered! She answered nervously—

"Mr. Hastings teaches us lessons."

"Ah! then there is some kind of responsible person to whom I can speak. Take me to him."

Cherry was obeying this request, when Mrs. Tipkins appeared in the hall. She seemed to know Mrs. Crawford, and made her an odd little bow.

"So you are promoted to be cook, and housekeeper, and everything else combined," said Mrs. Crawford briskly to her. "If I had not been abroad when your master settled himself here, I should have, of course, been here arranging matters. Is there absolutely no lady in charge? Who looks after these little girls?"

"I do, mem," said Mrs. Tipkins a little grandly; "leastways, me and Mr. Hastings divides that honour."

"I am going to see Mr. Hastings now. Afterwards I will pay you a visit in your kitchen, Mrs. Tipkins."

Mrs. Tipkins did not look particularly pleased at this prospect, but she said nothing, and Mrs. Crawford followed Cherry upstairs to the schoolroom, where they found the boys engaged in doing sums.

Mrs. Crawford sailed into the room with great dignity, though she was a little breathless by her ascent.

She bowed in a very gracious way to Mr. Hastings, who drew forward a chair for her, and concealed his surprise at her appearance.

"Glad to make your acquaintance, Mr. Hastings. Are these your pupils? Shake hands with me, my dears, for I am your cousin."

Stacy and Phil stared at her in astonishment.

"I have come over to see the Colonel, Mr. Hastings,

but he does not appear well enough to see me. I am his nearest relative, and live about seven miles off. I could hardly believe my ears when I heard he had returned from India and had opened this house again. I only heard of it quite accidentally. May I ask how long you have been here?"

Mr. Hastings answered that question and many others with great composure. The children listened; then withdrew to the further end of the room to make their own remarks.

"She's too old to be a cousin," announced Phil. "I only hope she speaks the truth. Cousins are always the same age. She ought to be an aunt, or a grandmother."

"She calls father 'Eustace,'" said Cherry, "and he calls her 'Anna.'"

"Of course she is his cousin—not ours."

"Father's cousin is mine," said Bonnie impetuously. "We belongs to each other. His mothers, and fathers, and aunts and uncles, they all is mine just the same."

"Father doesn't want to see her," said Cherry slowly; "and she wants to see him. It is rather differcult!"

"What is?" demanded Stacy; "you've nothing to do with it!"

"Yes I have. Father sent for me to say I was to keep her away from him!"

Cherry raised her voice in her excitement, and Mrs. Crawford caught her words.

She laughed a little.

"There you see, Mr. Hastings! That is how I am treated. I, who nursed my husband through six successive illnesses before he died! But men are always very queer when they are ill. You seem an

extraordinary household. How many servants are there, may I ask?"

Mr. Hastings told her. She did not appear satisfied, and finally rustled out of the room to interview Mrs. Tipkins again. She stayed a good hour, during which time she thoroughly overlooked the whole household, even to the extent of the children's wardrobes, and drove Nettie to tears, by showing her socks and stockings which sadly needed mending.

When she finally came downstairs she found Cherry sitting outside her father's door.

"Mounting guard, are you?" she said pleasantly. "Tell your father I will come over and see you all one day next week, when I hope he will be well enough to entertain me. Until then, good-bye!"

She stooped and kissed her, and bustled out of the door. As the carriage rolled away, Cherry heard her father call her.

She stepped into his room timidly.

"Has she gone?"

"Yes, father."

The Colonel looked at his little daughter with a smile.

"It is not many who get the better of your Cousin Anna," he said. "Whatever you are, Cherry, when you grow up, don't you be a managing woman! If every one left their neighbours' affairs alone and attended to themselves, it would be a better world."

Cherry pondered over this, all the rest of the day. What "Father" said must of course be right. Doing good to others was not right then. It was better to leave them alone. How very puzzling the ways of the world were! How could she ever understand them?

CHAPTER V

Their Adventure

IT was Saturday afternoon. Mr. Hastings had been obliged to go into the neighbouring town on business, and the children were left alone.

They were out on the lawn, lying under the shade of an old elm. It was a very warm day. The boys were in their flannels; they had been playing cricket, and were tired enough to like a rest.

"We must think of something to do," said Stacy, sitting up with his back against a tree, and with what Phil called his "war-look" on his face.

"It's awfully dull with no fellows about," grumbled Phil. "Of course I'm glad we don't have grown-ups bothering round us; but then grown-ups do have boys of their own sometimes."

"Yes, I think father is rather like one of those hermits we read about. Goff said to-day, 'The Colonel would be better for company.' He said it to Mrs. Tipkins, and she said, 'Ah! 'tis very true, Mr. Goff, but he is the unsociable kind, an' it's a real pity, for there be many nice gentry here and about.' I

should like to know some, I think; at least, if there are any chaps about our age I should!"

"Let us have a game of 'follow my leader,'" suggested Cherry.

"We must toss for the leader," cried Phil.

Stacy won, fortunately, and he rose to the bait.

"Come on," he said; and for the next half-hour they were racing through the garden, leaping flower-beds, scaling fences, and doing everything that in the ordinary course of events they would not.

They finally made their way into the farmyard. A small cart and pony, used for taking parcels and coals to and from the station, stood in the yard. On the impulse of the moment Stacy jumped into it, and the others were after him directly. When Bonnie had been helped up, Stacy took the reins, and drove the pony out of the yard. He touched him with the whip, and set him off at a sharp trot down the lane. It was a novel experience, and Bonnie clapped her hands with delight.

"We're going out for a drive," she said. "Let's drive round and round the world!"

"We'll see the country a bit," said Stacy, sitting up and adopting a very manly air.

Phil looked at him thoughtfully. He knew his brother had never driven before. Dr. Burton had occasionally taken him out in his trap, and let him hold the reins; but this was very seldom.

"Mind you hold him in, if he runs away," he remarked, then settled down to enjoy himself. Cherry and Bonnie thought it great fun. They came out on the high road, and another flick of the whip made the pony canter on merrily. They passed the village and

station, and soon came to wooded lanes that enchanted the little girls.

"Do stop, Stacy, there's a lovely wild rose coming out—and oh what a lot of dear little ferns!"

"I'm not going to stop yet," said Stacy, "for any roses or ferns. Halloo! here's a big carriage coming!"

He nearly precipitated the cart into the ditch, so anxious was he to avoid a collision; but Phil exclaimed—

"It's the old fat cousin of father's! Hurry up, or she will see us!" That made Stacy nervous. However, he righted the cart, and then hearing a sudden call, whipped up his horse at once. Mrs. Crawford had seen them, and, signing to her coachman to turn round, she called out—

"Stop at once, children—do you hear me? I want to speak to you!"

A race ensued; Phil took off his hat and waved "hurra!" The little pony was fresh and vigorous; the cumbrous carriage behind could not overtake them. Stacy turned up a side lane, then down another, and it was only when the pony showed signs of fatigue that he pulled up.

"I knew her old carriage wouldn't follow us down here. What was she wanting to stop us for, I should like to know!"

"She looked very angry," said Cherry. "I think perhaps we ought to go home, Stacy."

"So we will directly, but I'm not going to meet her again, and this lane is too narrow to turn in. It must come out somewhere, so we must go on."

The lane was a very long one. It wound uphill, and

when they at last reached the end of it they found themselves confronted by three different roads. There was no signpost. After a little hesitation, Stacy turned down the one leading to the left.

"We'll ask the first person we meet if we are on the way home," he said.

But they met no one for miles. The road seemed at times little more than a grass track. Stacy began to look uneasy. Phil began to discourse in his argumentative way—

"You see, the road was made to lead somewhere; we must go on till we get to a house. Roads never lead nowhere unless there's a board 'No thoroughfare.' And if there's a house, there's sure to be some one in it, and they will tell us where we are."

"Are we lost?" inquired Bonnie, with sudden interest.

"Of course not," said Stacy impatiently. "How can you be lost on a high road, in a horse and cart?"

"We aren't exactly *in* a horse," argued Phil.

Cherry was very comfortable. She was never anxious if she had no responsibility. She sat at the bottom of the cart, looking out at the fresh green foliage, at the afternoon sun sending golden slanting rays across some thin dark belts of pine trees which edged the road, and listening to the sweet and joyous notes of the birds. She was almost asleep, when suddenly, without any warning, there was a grating noise, and a shock. Stacy had not been looking where he was going, and had driven over a huge bolder of granite by the side of the road. The wheel stuck; the brave little pony tried to free the cart, but without success. Stacy and Phil, in disgust, got out, and tried to move it.

"Something is broken, but I don't know what," Stacy announced; "you girls had better get out."

"Now what shall we do?" was the next question they asked each other.

"We'll have to camp out like gipsies for the night," said Phil excitedly. "We must unharness the pony and tie him to a tree; and then we'll make a fire, and cook by it, and we'll tip the cart up, and go to sleep in it. It will be jolly!"

Stacy rubbed his head, as he had seen Abercrombie do, very doubtfully.

"We've nothing to cook," he said, looking round.

"That's just the best of it. We shall have to catch rabbit or some fish. It's a regular adventure. Here is a pine wood close at hand, and plenty of cones to make a fire with. It's like that chap who ran away from school told us he did—only he hadn't a cart and horse. You can do anything with them."

Then Stacy brightened up.

"Of course," he said; "I'm an awful duffer. You must stay here and take care of the girls, Phil, and I'll ride on with the pony to find out where we are. Then I'll come back. I can easily get home on the pony."

"Yes, but we can't," argued Phil, "and we had much better stay altogether."

But Stacy would not be persuaded. The prospect of a ride filled him with delight. He made Phil help him to unharness the poor pony, who, feeling he deserved a rest, was contentedly munching some grass in the hedge; and then mounting his steed and taking the whip in his hand, he set off at a smart trot along the road.

Phil looked after him rather crossly; then determined to make himself master of the situation.

"I shouldn't wonder if he has a spill," he remarked. "He is jogging up and down awfully. Now, Cherry, you and Bonnie must collect some sticks and fir-cones. I will try and pull the cart round in this corner, and then, when we've made our fire, I'll go out and hunt for some supper."

"And shall we have to stay here when it is dark?" asked Cherry.

"Oh, yes. I don't expect Stacy back at all. He doesn't know his way, and the pony is tired out. He won't have half the fun we shall have."

"And what will poor father do?" asked Bonnie.

"He won't know where we are. He won't ask, and Hastings isn't coming back till awfully late to-night. We're all right. It will be ripping!"

It certainly was very pleasant in the sunshine. It was still and warm, and the little girls thoroughly enjoyed their task. Dry leaves, pine needles and cones, with sticks of all sorts and sizes, soon made a formidable pile. Phil turned out his pockets eagerly for a match. He was half afraid for a minute that he had not one; but amongst a medley of string, buttons, marbles, corks, and pins, he found two wax matches. One match was a failure—it went out before it accomplished its mission, but the other succeeded. A little tiny flame ran through the dry leaves, then gradually spread, attacking cones, and sticks with a right good will.

Bonnie danced round it, clapping her hands.

"It's a beautiful fire!"

"But what is it for?" asked Cherry.

"Oh," said Phil vaguely, "gipsies and people out of doors always have fires. Travellers do too. It keeps off wild beasts, and you cook hot suppers over it. Besides, it gives you light when it gets dark."

"I'm so hungry," said Bonnie.

"Well, now we have to hunt for something to eat. I think you had better sit down and keep up the fire, and I will look about for a river or stream that has fish in it. I'll just make my line first. Cherry, just look about for a worm, will you?"

Phil sat down, and in a most business-like manner began tying his different bits of string together. At the end of them he attached a bent pin, and he cut a stout stick from some hazel bushes near to form a rod. But it was a long time before a worm could be found, and at last he said he would wait no longer.

"I shall get one easily down by the river," he said.

Cherry begged to accompany him.

"Oh, no; I may meet with adventures, and you are safer here. I shall be rather a long time, but there must be water somewhere, and if there is a stream it may lead to a river, and if there is a river there will be fish."

"And if there is a fish, will you be able to catch it?" questioned Cherry.

Phil would not deign to reply. He scampered off through the wood close to them. Cherry sat down by the fire and began to feel lonely. Presently she joined Bonnie in flower-picking. Time crept on; shadows began to lie deeper round them; the sun sank out of sight, but kindly left some of his rosy rays to cheer them; still, even they faded at last, and dusky twilight set in.

"Oh! Cherry, we must go home," said Bonnie entreatingly. "I've never seen the middle of the night, and it's coming so fast. I don't like it at all."

When Bonnie's cheerfulness deserted her, Cherry always fell into black despair. She struggled to be brave.

"Sit by me, Bonnie; we'll come close to the fire. Let's put some more of these dear little cones on it and make it blaze. I expect Phil will be back d'rectly!"

Bonnie crept close to her sister, then put her curly head down on her lap.

"Dear God won't let the dark hurt us, will He? He knows quite well I don't like it."

Before Cherry could frame a suitable reply Bonnie's sleepy eyes had closed, and she was fast asleep.

The dusk began to deepen. Cherry sat looking straight before her, with open terror-stricken eyes.

What was it Phil said about the fire? "It kept off wild beasts." Were there wild beasts in this part of the country? Not lions or tigers certainly, but there might be wolves, and she was sure she had heard of foxes, and Goff had talked of ferrets that killed rabbits, little sharp-nosed creatures with dreadful teeth! Supposing they should come by now! Poor little Cherry! her heart thumped and throbbed; her head began to swim; she was panic-stricken. Oh! why did the boys leave them? she wondered. It was cruel! It was unkind! She felt angry with Bonnie for going to sleep so comfortably and leaving her to sit up and watch alone. She thought of calling for Phil, but felt too frightened to utter a sound.

"Phil must be lost, and Stacy must be lost, and

Bonnie and I are lost, and no one will ever find us!" she said to herself dismally. Then the story of the Babes in the Wood came to her mind.

"They wandered in the wood for days and days with nothing to eat, and at last they lay down and died, and the birds brought leaves and buried them up with them," she repeated to herself, with a little dry sob. "That's just what will happen to me and Bonnie if the wild beasts don't eat us up."

Then suddenly she gave a violent start. A rabbit tore past her, and after it, to her terror, came a huge brown creature with glaring eyes and open mouth.

It was a wolf! That was her one thought, and she gave such a shriek of fright that Bonnie woke up. The creature had gone, but Cherry was shaking from head to foot.

"Where is we? Is it morning?" demanded Bonnie confusedly.

Cherry was on her feet, staring into the dusk before her. What was that moving? Yes, the wolf was coming back. It was coming straight towards them.

"Oh, God, please help me to be brave!" cried Cherry; then she threw her arm round her little sister and waited, as she thought, to be torn to pieces. She did not hear footsteps approach, so was doubly startled when she heard a voice close to her.

"Are you two little girls here alone?"

It was a lady in a short walking skirt, who carried a stout stick in her hand. Then as Cherry's "wolf" leapt up at her she beat him down with her hand.

"Down, Oscar, down! Don't be afraid of my big dog, he won't hurt you!"

Cherry's fortitude gave way. She caught hold of the lady's dress and began to sob.

"I—I—thought he was a wolf!"

The lady did not smile. Her voice, which had a sharp, brisk ring in it, became wonderfully gentle.

"You poor little mites! I thought you were some tramp's children when I saw you first, but I see I am mistaken. Don't cry, dear, but tell me how you came here."

It was some minutes before Cherry was calm enough to tell her tale. She was trembling from head to foot. Bonnie tried to explain, but she was half-dazed with sleep, and was rather incoherent.

"The boys have run away, and dear God putted me to sleep, and we're going to be gipsies, but I wants father."

At last Cherry could speak. She gave a correct account of themselves, finishing up with—

"We've all gone away from each other, and we shall never find each other again. Phil said we were to stay here. He went to catch fish for our supper."

"Phil is a little duffer! There are no fish in these parts. Is this your cart? I don't know what I had better do with you. I am hurrying home myself. I am not generally out so late, but my house is close at hand; you must come home with me."

"But what will the boys do?" said Cherry anxiously.

"Bother the boys! They had no business to leave you two mites alone. It will serve them right, and teach them a lesson. I dare say they have found their way home by this time."

"Can't we go home?" questioned Cherry.

"Don't be afraid of my big dog: he won't hurt you!"

"My dear child, do you know you are a good ten miles away from Instanton? I know your father—at least I used to know him when I was a small girl. I was abroad when he settled down here first, and I have only just heard of his return from India. You need not be afraid of me. I am not a stranger. And I will send a groom over to say where you are."

Cherry stood still, with a perplexed look on her face. But suddenly a shout was heard, and Phil came running breathless through the wood.

"Are you all right?"

"It's no thanks to you that they are," said the lady severely. "What do you mean by leaving your little sisters like this?"

Phil was too out of breath to speak for a minute; then he began to defend himself.

"I wasn't going to let them starve. That's what I meant!" he said defiantly. Then he turned to Cherry.

"I couldn't find any water anywhere, but after a long time I saw a house, and I went up, and the man was out and I waited, and the woman gave me a jolly meat pie to eat, and he came back, and he's got a cart and horse, and he's coming down the road as fast as he can for you. And he'll take us home, and I expect we shall get there before Stacy. He's a regular old dunderhead! I lost myself coming back to you, that's why I've been such a long time!"

Sure enough the rumble of cart-wheels were making themselves heard, and in a minute a man in a spring cart made his appearance.

The lady turned to him.

"Do you know where Instanton is?" she said. "It

is a good ten miles away. These poor little girls are quite tired out. They are not fit to drive that distance without any food."

"Ay, mum, it be a longish drive, but the young master were so determined that I could only do my best."

He had got out of his trap and was examining the overturned cart. Phil stood anxiously by.

"Is it broken?" he asked.

"Ay, one of the springs be smashed."

The lady seemed to be considering. Then she pulled out her pocket-book, and tearing out a leaf, began to write hastily upon it.

"There!" she said, giving it to Phil, "take that to your father. Tell him Blanche Arnold has met you, and has taken your little sisters to spend a day with her. Get into the cart, and go home as fast as you can. I am not going to let these poor children go with you. I will take care of them."

Phil looked at her stubbornly.

"They aren't your sisters," he said, "they belong to me, and father doesn't like strangers."

"Bless the boy! Ask your father if Blanche Arnold is a stranger? Give my note to him, that is all you have to do. Now come along, chicks; we have a little way to walk."

She took hold of the little girls' hands, and marched them away. Phil felt he was being worsted. He climbed into the cart and called out—

"If you aren't speaking true, my father is a Colonel, and he'll know how to treat you! You weren't wanted at all. Father hates people meddling, and I was going to take them home. I shall tell him so!"

Phil was not by nature a rude boy, but his feelings were hurt by the interference of a stranger, when he thought he had managed so cleverly.

Miss Arnold only laughed at him. She opened a little gate in the hedge, crossed a field, and then a large house came in view. Cherry was so tired that she had no very clear recollection of what followed. She was dimly conscious of lights and warmth, of swallowing a basin of bread and milk, and of being tucked up into a very comfortable bed and kissed. Then she remembered no more, for sleep overtook her.

CHAPTER VI

A Cumberer

THE next morning always remained very vividly in Cherry's memory. She woke early, and found herself and Bonnie in a big four-post bed. The room was a large, sunny one; the chintz curtains were covered with bright birds and flowers. There was a large oil-painting over the dressing-table, and this picture at once attracted her attention. It was the portrait of a little dark haired girl, in a white muslin frock, and red coral beads round her neck. She was standing on some stone steps, with white pigeons fluttering round her, and one pigeon was perched on her outstretched hand. Cherry looked at it with great admiration. The little girl looked rosy and happy, the pigeons evidently loved her, and Cherry wondered if she was still alive somewhere. She crept out of bed very quietly presently, and pulled up the blind to look out of the window. It was a lovely morning, and the garden below seemed full of sweet-scented flowers; meadows of green grass lay all round it, and behind a little group of green lime trees the tower of the village church peeped out The bells began to chime as she

looked, and with a start she remembered it was Sunday. Bonnie stirred in bed, and then sat up rubbing her eyes.

She looked very astonished at her surroundings, and Cherry had to come back to bed and explain things to her.

"Where are we?" she persisted. "Are you sure we're in England still?"

Bonnie had just begun to learn geography, and the different countries puzzled her very much.

"What will father say when I can't fill his pipe with his lovely tobacco?" she asked presently. "And where shall we have our breakfast?"

A pleasant-looking maid soon entered to help them dress. But Cherry was distressed beyond measure, when she saw her dirty, crumpled brown holland frock.

"It is Sunday, Bonnie, and we've no white frocks!"

"No, 'tis a pity," assented the maid. "If you had clean pinneys 'twould be all right, but you don't look very grand."

Bonnie was too impatient to get her breakfast to care. But when they came down the broad soft-carpeted stairs and entered a large dining-room, with two men-servants standing at the door, Cherry felt terrified.

Miss Arnold followed them in, and kissed her fears away.

"I am so lonely, that your two dear little faces quite cheer me up. Did you sleep well? That is right. Now let us come to the table. Here is Oscar, you see, coming in to make your acquaintance."

Cherry laid her small hand on the mastiff's shaggy head with a smile. Yesterday, with all its terrors, seemed

like a bad dream. Bonnie chattered in her own incoherent style through breakfast, and Miss Arnold sat listening and laughing. When they had finished, she told them to get their hats and come out into the garden with her. She took them to see some young pheasants, and then, turning the corner, they came to the very same stone terrace that Cherry had seen in the picture. The pigeons were still flying about it, and Cherry almost expected to see the little girl in the white muslin frock come tripping along. Something in her face made Miss Arnold look at her.

"What is it, dear? Are you expecting to see some one?"

"Yes," said Cherry breathlessly; "the little girl in the picture—the one that is in our room with the pigeons all round her."

Miss Arnold smiled.

"You are an observant child. Did the little girl take your fancy?"

"Oh yes. Is she alive?"

"Yes, very much so."

"Could I see her? Does she live here?"

Cherry's tongue was eager. Miss Arnold looked amused, then a sad smile came to her lips.

"You cannot see her as she is in that picture, for that is long ago. That child is running about no more. She has grown up into a lonely discontented woman who has everything she wants, and yet never has enough."

Cherry looked up into her face wonderingly.

"Yes, it seems very funny, doesn't it? But that is a picture of myself long, long ago."

"Were you that little girl?" gasped Cherry.

"Indeed I was. I remember a grand artist coming down here to paint my picture, and how difficult it was to stand still until he began to tell me a wonderful fairy story. Then I was ready to stay there all day."

"I love fairy stories," said Cherry; "did he tell you a nice one?"

"Oh, the usual style; a very beautiful princess, and a good prince, and a good and a wicked fairy, and everything first going all wrong and then all right. Not much like life, I fancy; but I suppose you children think it is. My experience is that things first go right, and end all wrong. But you won't understand me."

Cherry did not attempt to do so.

"Now," continued Miss Arnold, altering her tone and speaking in her usual cheerful one, "I must go to church this morning, but you little ones can stay in the garden and play. Do you get into mischief as a rule if you have no one to look after you?"

"We'll try not to," said Cherry; "and it is Sunday, so we will be very quiet."

"When are we going home?" asked Bonnie.

"I have not told you that I had a note from your father this morning, saying he was quite willing that I should keep you till to-morrow."

"And is he angry with us?"

"I hope he is angry with the boys, but not with you I should think. Your father said your other brother had just arrived. I should give them a good whipping if I were your father!"

The little girls looked quite aghast. Bonnie hastened to say, "Father isn't a cruel man at all, he's quite gentle, and he lies still and smiles at me, and father and me

thinks a lot of things when we sit close. We thinks of dear God on Sundays always!"

Miss Arnold looked at her curiously.

"I should like to listen to your father's thinks, when you are in his pockets. Goodbye, little ones!"

She was gone.

"It is very wicked not to go to church," said Cherry thoughtfully; "but it is because of our dirty frocks, I'm sure."

"Is dear God angry?"

"I expect He understands."

"Had we better explain it to Him?" Bonnie's tone was anxious.

"He knows, Bonnie. Shall we sit under those trees over there, and have church by ourselves?"

This bright idea was carried into execution at once. Cherry was the clergyman, Bonnie the congregation. The service was rather in scraps: sentences repeated from memory, the Lord's Prayer said at three different times, and the "glorias" sung whenever there was an awkward pause. Two hymns went very well, and then came the sermon. Cherry looked about for a pulpit, and then delightedly swung herself up into the old oak tree close by.

"Oh, that isn't fair; let me come up too!" exclaimed Bonnie.

"Hush! you are in a pew. The congregation never comes into the pulpit. I'm going to give out my text, only I must climb a little higher first."

"Climbing trees isn't Sunday!" objected Bonnie.

"It's a pulpit. Now I'm right. I'll take my text from the Bible. It is about a tree and a man, and the text is—'I come to look for fruit.'"

Bonnie folded her arms and prepared to listen. Cherry, clasping a big bough with both hands, began to speak with much fervour.

"This man had a tree, and three years long it had done nothing at all; it stood still, and wouldn't have any fruit. It was a fig tree, and the figs wouldn't come; the gardener shook his head at it, and the tree didn't seem to mind much, until one day the master came and said, 'It is doing nothing, cut it down.' Then the tree got frightened, but the gardener said, 'Please sir, not just yet! Perhaps it will do better soon.' And then the master went away, and the tree cried hard, but the figs wouldn't come; and every morning when the tree woke up he looked to see if he had any fruit, and then he cried because though he tried his hardest, the figs wouldn't come."

Bonnie was deeply interested. She forgot it was a sermon.

"Poor little tree! What a nice story, Cherry—do go on."

"And then," said Cherry, "one day, when it was crying, an angel came by. 'What's the matter?' the angel said; so the tree told her, and she said, 'Never mind, little tree; I'll go back to heaven and see what I can do.' So she flew up and asked God about it; and then one night, when the tree was fast asleep, the angel came back with a basket of figs, and she tied them on to the little tree, and when he woke up they were growing all over him."

"How dreadfully delicious!" cried Bonnie, clapping her hands. "What else?"

"So by and by the gardener came along, and then the

master came along, and the tree smiled all over, and the master looked very pleased. 'It's a good little tree after all,' he said, and the tree was happy ever after."

There was a pause.

"And now, dearly beloved, church is over, and I'm coming down."

Down she came very much faster than she went up, for she missed her footing, and fell with a heavy thud on the grass. Happily she had not very far to fall, and a grazed elbow and knee was the only result.

"That's a very nice story," said Bonnie, "but it isn't like the clergyman talks. Who told you that story, Cherry?"

"It's quite a Sunday story, because it comes in the Bible. At least," she added truthfully, "the beginning of it does, and I made up the end myself."

Bonnie sat for some minutes in deep thought; then she got up from her seat on the grass, and accompanied her sister to the poultry yard, where they spent the rest of the time watching the antics of some tiny ducks in a water trough.

Miss Arnold came home from church, and took them in to luncheon with her. After it was over she said, "Now I will take you into the garden, and you shall pick some ripe gooseberries; then we will sit out on the lawn, and eat them, and you can tell me all about yourselves."

The children followed her delightedly through a little door in a high brick wall, and found themselves in a large old-fashioned garden surrounded by four high walls. Fruit trees were in profusion, trained along the ground, and up the walls, and in long rows by themselves.

"You must come here when the strawberries are ripe," said Miss Arnold. "It is a little too early yet, and then, later on, we have peaches and apricots and such a lot of plums. After that the apples and pears and nuts come. Do you see that funny little tree? That is a medlar, and that big tree in the middle is a mulberry."

"And have you a cherry-tree?"

"Oh yes, lots; they will be ripe very soon."

"And a fig-tree?" asked Bonnie.

"Yes, those in that corner are fig-trees."

"Cherry has told me a lovely story about a fig-tree," said Bonnie, nodding excitedly. "And I'll tell it to father when I see him!"

"Have you a cumberer tree?" asked Cherry, a little shyly.

"What is that?"

Cherry looked confused. "It's a tree without fruit."

"Oh, there are plenty of trees without fruit in the other garden," said Miss Arnold, wondering what she meant.

"No, but I mean a proper fruit tree, that is meant to have fruit but doesn't do it."

"Oh, then I wouldn't have it in my garden at all. It would be no good."

"Yes, of course, it wouldn't be here."

Cherry's tone was quite miserable.

Bonnie had reached the gooseberry bushes, and was very busy trying to pick some without pricking herself. But though Miss Arnold tried to incite Cherry to do the same, she was gazing in a dreamy way in front of her, and presently tears began to gather in her eyes.

Miss Arnold had keen sight. She felt strangely drawn to this earnest-looking little maiden, and taking her hand in hers she left Bonnie enjoying herself, and walked on with Cherry.

"What is it, dear?"

"Of course I knew the Bible would be true, and I expect it was no use waiting; the tree never did get any better."

"What tree, dear?"

"The cumberer, in the Bible."

Miss Arnold looked completely puzzled.

Cherry tried to explain. Her trouble, which had been simmering so long in her mind, seemed to-day to come uppermost, and nearly overwhelm her.

"I've got a cumberer tree of my own," she said, pulling a diminutive handkerchief out of her pocket and hastily drying her eyes. "I suppose A.B.C. will cut it down soon. It's no good, and it never will be, and I feel it's just like me."

"But why is it like you?"

"A clergyman told me not to be a cumberer, and then I read about it, and A.B.C. showed me the cherry-tree that mother planted when I was born. It hasn't got any cherries on it at all, and it never has had any, and Stacy's and Phil's and Bonnie's trees are all having fruit, and I have none at all!"

Miss Arnold was quite unused to children. She did not laugh; she saw the trouble was a real one.

"But why should *you* be a cumberer, as you call it? You are not a tree."

"The clergyman said I was—a kind of one. I feel I am a cumberer, because I don't do any good to any-

body. I just am doing nothing, like my tree. And the worst of it is I don't know what to do, and how to do it! I'm sure God is waiting for me to grow fruit. He won't keep me in His garden if I don't. Just like you said just now! And oh, I don't want to be a cumberer!"

"I am sure you are not a cumberer, dear. You are a good, useful little girl. I won't have tears in my fruit garden. Let us come back to Bonnie, and eat gooseberries, and I'll tell you a story about your father when he was a little boy."

Cherry's tears were stopped for the time, and for the rest of the day she was a happy, light-hearted child. But when she and Bonnie were in bed that night, Miss Arnold sat in her big lonely drawing-room, turning over the pages of a Book with which she was not very familiar. She took a long time to find the passage about the cumberer, but she discovered it at last, and read it slowly and thoughtfully through.

"How extraordinary children are," she muttered to herself. "How easily they understand and adapt allegories to themselves!"

Then she sat with her elbows resting on the small table before her, and her chin in her hands. Her thoughts did not seem pleasant ones, for her brows were knitted, and her eyes were sad.

She rose at last with a heavy sigh, and went up to bed saying over to herself—

"Why cumbereth it the ground?"

CHAPTER VII

Bonnie's Story

THE next morning Miss Arnold took the little girls home in her carriage. She did not come into the house with them, but when she kissed Cherry in parting she said—

"You must come over and see me again, and be my little friend. I live all alone, and am very dull, for I have nothing to do."

And Cherry's little heart responded gladly to this appeal. Shy as she was of most strangers, she did not fear Miss Arnold; she longed to talk to her and ask her some of the things that troubled her. She and Bonnie went straight to their father, and gave a full account of themselves.

"Everybody seems to know you, father," said Cherry wonderingly.

"Of course they do. A little too well for my taste. I am not going to have a pack of women about my place. Blanche Arnold was a regular young scapegrace when she was a child. I should have thought she would have married."

He did not scold them for their escapade on the

Saturday, but when they reached the schoolroom they had much to hear from the boys.

Phil was indignant with them.

"You managed jolly well for yourselves," he said, "in sucking up to a stranger, and inviting yourselves to her house to be out of the way of the row! And then you come smiling home as if nothing had happened! I shan't take any trouble about you another time, but just look after myself.

"I don't think you had half as bad a time as I had," said Stacy.

"How did you come home?" Cherry asked, with interest.

"Oh, I got home half an hour after Phil did. That pony is the stupidest animal I've ever come across. I rode on till I came to a village, and just as I was coming up the street, the pony stumbled and pitched me off and broke his knees. And I hit my head such a crack that I couldn't speak or remember anything. And when I did, I found a carrier's cart was just on its way to the village here, and as I could get no one to walk back with me to you, I thought I'd better come on home, and send the carriage to fetch you back. I thought I was never going to get here. The old duffer driving, stopped at every house he came to and handed out parcels, and talked till he was black in the face, and had to have a drink before he could go on again."

"And where's the pony?"

"Oh, he came with me. He was tied on behind. Hastings was awfully mad; he has hardly recovered yet!"

"And what did father say?"

"Oh, Stacy backed out of going in to him! I took Miss Arnold's note. And Goff was like a fury, but father just lounged back and smoked his pipe and looked at me!"

"How did he look?"

"He tried to make a fellow feel uncomfortable, but I told him my story, and then Stacy was sent for, and father said very quietly: 'When you have a cart and horse of your own, you will be at liberty to use it. Until then you will please remember that taking other people's things without asking their permission is one form of stealing, and that, as I have been taught, is not one of an English gentleman's characteristics

Phil mimicked his father's slow, languid tones to perfection.

Stacy put in his word.

"Of course I wasn't going to stand that. I said if the cart and horse belonged to him I thought I might be allowed to use it; and as for stealing, I wasn't a beggar or a thief, and——"

"Yes," said Phil, "Stacy got as red as a turkey cock, and stuttered and blew himself out, till he was ordered out of the room. And then Hastings came home and gave us an hour's lecture—and, by the bye, who do you think had split on us and got here with the news that we were tearing over the country like a tinker's crew?"

"Who?"

"That old lady cousin of ours who passed us in the road. She came on here, and went into father's room and made him as waxy as she could. I'll be even with her one day!"

Phil tried to look fierce as he spoke.

"Yes," said Stacy, "this seems a dreadful place for unknown relations to be spying on you. Is this Miss Arnold another cousin, I'd like to know!"

"Oh, no, she's very nice," said Cherry decidedly. "She's going to ask us into her garden to eat strawberries one day."

"Well, after all," said Phil, "it was a kind of adventure, and though we shan't be able to do it again, we may find something else to do quite as jolly!"

"Yes," said Cherry thoughtfully, "I liked the beginning of it, and I liked the end, but—but I didn't like the middle!"

Later that day, she and Bonnie were seated in "Mother's garden" playing with their dolls.

"I wish we had a fig-tree here," said Bonnie. She could not forget Cherry's story. It had made a great impression on her.

"My cherry-tree is just like it," said Cherry sorrowfully. "It won't have any cherries on it."

Bonnie looked at it with great interest.

"Do you think we ought to cut it down?" she asked. "I could get a knife, or the big chopper that A.B.C. uses. It would be great fun, Cherry; do let us!"

But Cherry shivered. She knelt down and put her arms round her tree, as if to protect it.

"I wouldn't hurt it for anything, Bonnie. How cruel of you! My dear little tree! It belongs to me, and I love it."

"But it ought to get some cherries on it," said Bonnie, looking at it disapprovingly. "Do you think it cries about it, and is sorry, like the tree in your story did?"

"Of course it is sorry," said Cherry quickly. "Of

course it would like to be covered all over with nice red cherries ; but it can't make them come."

"Shall we ask dear God to send an angel down in the night with a basket? And then to-morrow p'r'aps we shall come and see them growing?"

Anything seemed probable to Bonnie, but Cherry hesitated. "That was only a story," she said slowly. "It was a make-up, Bonnie."

"Yes, but angels isn't make-up. They really does come down from the sky every night. They comes to take care of me. I'm sure dear God would do it, Cherry."

"They don't have baskets of cherries in heaven," said Cherry.

"What a pity! Don't they? Can't dear God get them from anywheres?"

"We might ask God to grow cherries on my tree," said Cherry slowly. "Because He makes the tree grow."

"So we will. Shall we ask dear God now?"

Hand in hand the little girls knelt down by the side of the little cherry-tree, and Cherry prayed aloud—

"Please God will you make cherries grow on my tree. It doesn't want to be a cumberer. Please make them come, and please don't let me be a cumberer, but make me have fruit for you to pick. For Jesus Christ's sake. Amen."

She wondered why she had never prayed before, and she rose from her knees comforted.

"If cherries could be grown, why should not God grow them?" she thought. He made the flowers, and the cherries, and surely He might make her, too, a fruitful tree in His garden!

"I'll come here and pray every day, Bonnie, until the cherries come."

"What did you call your tree, Cherry? A cumber?" asked Bonnie, a few minutes after.

"A cumberer!"

"Why do you say that?"

"Because that's the meaning of a cumberer. A tree that does nothing, and is no good to anybody."

Bonnie repeated this over to herself several times. She asked no more questions, but that afternoon she was sitting in the verandah with her father.

Cherry was playing cricket with the boys. Bonnie was not required; she was apt to get too excited, and if asked to field, would throw the ball in any direction. She could not bowl, and the bat was too heavy for her little hands. She was quite content to chatter away to her father, while he read his paper and smoked.

She was perched on his knees, and her little face was full of eager importance.

"I've heard a lovelly story, father dear. Cherry tolded it to me out of a tree. It was because we didn't go to church. Wouldn't you like to hear it?"

"Very much."

Bonnie wriggled herself a little closer to her father, then sticking one chubby finger through a button-hole of his coat she began her tale.

"There was once a dear little tree in a garden and a man. Two mens there was, and one man said 'Cut it down d'reckly!' And the other said, 'Not just yet please.' It was a cumber tree you know, and it ought to have grown a lot of figs, and there wasn't one—no not one on it at all!"

Bonnie paused, and looked up into her father's face. When she told a story, she expected applause the whole way through.

"That was very sad!" he remarked gravely.

"Very sad indeed!" echoed Bonnie, shaking her head violently from side to side; "and every day it did just the same; it never growed any figs. So one day the mens came again. 'Cut it down d'rectly,' the genkleman said, and the poor little tree shook itself, and cried and cried, and it was frighted, and it tried as hard as ever it could to grow figs, and it couldn't. Aren't you sorry for the poor little tree?"

"Shall I cry?" asked her father.

"Yes, Cherry nearly does. Now listen. One day a angel came by and asked the matter, and she said she would tell dear God all about it. So she flew as fast as she could up to heaven, and she came down again in the middle of the night, and so she tied some figs on to the tree out of her basket, and so when the little cumber tree woke up the next morning he found he was full—quite crowded—full of figs!"

"What a lucky little tree!"

"Yes, and he wasn't a cumber tree any more."

"Is that all?"

"Yes, isn't it lovelly?"

"Did Cherry make that up?"

"It's in the Bible, she says. Will you read it to me, father?"

"Not to-day."

"Will you read it to me to-morrow?"

"I think the Bible is kept for Sundays."

"Next Sunday will you read it to me?"

"We will see."

"And do you know," Bonnie continued confidentially, "Cherry has got a cumber tree all of her own! Isn't that wunnerful?"

"What do you call a cumber tree?"

"Cherry explained it to me. She said it's a tree that does nothing and is no good to nobody, and that's what her tree does, and cumber trees are always cut right off out of the ground, but Cherry won't cut hers down, and we telled dear God we wanted Him to grow cherries on it, and not let it be a cumber tree any more. Do you think dear God will fill it full of cherries?"

The Colonel shook his head. "I don't know about such things," he said, and then he put her off his knee with an amused smile, and Bonnie sat down by the side of her "Dinah," and began chattering to her.

Presently Cherry came running across the lawn. Cricket was over; the boys were going indoors to prepare some lessons for the next day, but they had sent her on a message to her father and she was coming to deliver it. She slackened her steps as she came near the verandah. She did not yet feel perfectly at ease in her father's presence.

Her father smiled at her as she came up. His smiles and the kind look in his eyes were what attracted Cherry so. But he only kept his smiles for his little daughters; the boys never saw them.

"I've come to ask you something, father."

"What is it?"

Cherry hesitated.

"We are not quite sure how rich you are, but Stacy says he is sure you are richer than Dr. Burton. And he

and Phil used to get fourpence a week pocket-money, and Bonnie and I had a penny."

There was a pause.

"And what do you get now?"

"We haven't had nothing," said Cherry, forgetting her grammar in her confusion. "Stacy had four shillings from his last birthday, but that's all gone now, and Phil had half a crown, and that's gone."

"I don't know what you children want money for," said the Colonel, with a little frown, "but Mr. Hastings will see to it. Ask him to give you what you are accustomed to have. I cannot be troubled with these kind of things."

"Thank you, father."

Cherry was beginning to know that phrase well—

"I cannot be troubled with these kind of things."

The Colonel took life easily. And Mr. Hastings found he had his hands full. Cherry looked at her father a little wistfully.

"If you don't like us to have money, Bonnie and me won't, father."

"But I likes pennies," put in Bonnie quickly; "I wants to get Dinah some shoes, and I gived Phil two halfpennies to buy some string, and I haven't any at all. I wish I was growed up."

"What would you do then?" asked the Colonel, smiling.

"Just the same as you does," was the quick reply; and sarcasm was unknown to Bonnie. "I would lie on a sofa, and do nothing. And I would fill my pipe with sugar candy, and I would have birds in cages to sing, and pretty flowers all round me."

"Is that your idea of life, Cherry?" asked the Colonel.

Cherry was silent; then she said, "I don't want to grow up, I shall have to do such differcult things."

"What kind of things?"

"Going in trains alone, and buying in shops, and—and teaching people to be good!"

"Well," said the Colonel slowly; "I think that last detail might be difficult, but I haven't met many who think it their duty to do it."

He nearly added, "I am thankful to say," but stopped himself in time. Cherry's grave, sweet eyes were looking earnestly at him.

"Auntie always did," she said. "I thought everybody had to."

"Do I teach you and Bonnie to be good?" asked the Colonel.

Cherry looked a little puzzled.

"You know about it," she said at length. "Grown-up people never do anything wrong. It's only children. You would tell us if we did wicked things. And you know things."

"What kind of things?"

"About God and heaven, and the Bible," said Cherry confidently. "Perhaps," she said, growing bolder, "you could tell me how to grow fruit."

"I think Abercrombie knows more of gardening than I do," said Colonel St. Leger, looking at Cherry curiously.

"I didn't mean the garden fruit," said Cherry, feeling her shyness come back. "I want to have fruit myself."

She would say no more, and a minute after, a summons came for them to go to bed.

"Children are very queer and incomprehensible," said the Colonel to himself, as he puffed away at his pipe. "It is best not to try to understand them."

CHAPTER VIII

Miss Arnold's Plan

"STILL gazing at that little girl?"

"Oh, I like looking at her. I wish I had been a little girl when you were, Miss Arnold."

Cherry was spending a day with her new friend, and she was taking off her hat in the bedroom when Miss Arnold found her standing opposite the picture.

Miss Arnold sat down and looked at the picture herself. "She was a very happy little girl, Cherry, then. Sometimes when I think of her, I feel rather sorry for her when she grew up, for everything was so different to what she thought it would be."

"Do tell me about her," said Cherry.

"She had a loving mother when that picture was taken, and a father who gave her everything she wanted. She went to school when she was bigger, and then one sad day she was sent for to see her mother die. She came home and lived with her father, but he was too sad now to cheer her or comfort her, and he died wo years after, a broken-hearted man. Then an aunt and

cousin came to live with her, and she tried to be happy. She was at last, when some one came along that she was very fond of. This friend and she were going to live together, and they planned and thought of so many nice things. The girl was full of good intentions—she would be a model wife—and everything would be beautiful. But a dark cloud came along and spoilt it all. The girl's cousin and friend came to know one another, and they thought they would suit each other best, so it altered everything. They were married, and the girl lived on alone with her aunt. Then her aunt became ill and suffered a good deal, and at last she died. So the girl was left quite alone then, and she wouldn't have any one else to live with her. She began to think that life was very unhappy, not at all what she had thought it when her picture was taken."

"And that girl is you? It's all about you!" cried Cherry wonderingly.

"Yes, all about me, and I am just living on here doing no good to anybody. In fact, Cherry, I am what you call a 'cumberer'! There now, aren't you sorry for me?"

"But grown-up people can't be cumberers," argued Cherry; "they're always so busy, and do such a lot of useful things."

Miss Arnold laughed. "Oh, you children, so ignorant and trustful! How I wish I were a child again!"

She took Cherry downstairs into her beautiful drawing-room, where she showed her all kinds of wonderful curiosities and quaint old picture-books; and then she sat down to her piano and played to her, and made her join in some old English songs. Cherry was enjoying

herself immensely, when the door opened, and Mrs. Crawford was announced.

"My dear Blanche, who have you here? One of Eustace's children? Now how, may I ask, did you get hold of her? You have never bearded the lion's den?"

Miss Arnold shook her head and laughed.

"I should not attempt such an audacity. I befriended this small damsel and her sister a week ago, and their visit is the result of a diplomatic note."

"Ah! you always were clever with your pen. I really am at my wits' end to know how to get him out of his shell. It is so ridiculous! It is not as if his wife had died yesterday. I begin to think a sunstroke he had in India has affected his head. I have begged him to dine with us; I have told him his old friends are dying to meet him. I have written him note after note, saying that a little cheerful society will do him more good than any amount of medicines. But he ignores every overture. I am longing, simply longing to arrange his household more comfortably. He wants at least three extra servants—two maids and a man; and these little girls ought to have a governess who would act as lady housekeeper. I have told him all this, and expressed my willingness to undertake everything for him; but he persistently refuses to allow me a voice in the matter."

"I should let him have a rest for a short time," said Miss Arnold, with a twinkle in her eye. "Give somebody else the benefit of your energy and goodwill."

"Oh, my dear, I have my hands full as it is. I have just come to ask if you can help me. Such a sad case in our village. Our carpenter has suddenly died, and left a

wife and five children absolutely unprovided for. They have not a penny, and there seems to be no relations. The wife is such a superior person; was lady's-maid to my dear friend Lady Matilda Otterham. There is nothing but the workhouse for them, unless I take them in hand, and of course I am going to do what I can. The eldest boy I am going to take into the stable at once; I am fitting out the eldest girl in clothes for service. She is fourteen, so it is time she was doing something. The mother must take in dressmaking. I have told her to begin at once, and I have told my maids to employ her in the future. I am making a collection just to ensure her having a small pittance a week to begin with. And I wonder if you have any black clothes you do not want. The funeral is to be in two days time."

"I'm afraid I have nothing for you in the shape of clothes," said Miss Arnold, stifling a yawn. "I never wear black. I hate it. I'll give you a sovereign, if you like, towards your collection."

"Oh, thank you! Delightful! And while I think of it, have you a vote for the B—— Orphan Asylum? I have a child I want to get there—a most deserving case; I must tell you about her——"

"There is no need. I have no votes. I gave up subscribing towards it. It was too much bother answering appeals from all sorts and kinds of people."

"I wish I had your leisure!"

"Now, Mrs. Crawford, you know you don't. You live your life, so let me live mine."

"But, my dear, you could do so much, with your influence, your wealth——

"*And* my laziness! Don't preach to me, please. I am very busy to-day entertaining this small guest. What! Must you be going? I won't take a leaf out of your book, and wish I were such a busy person as you are, but I do admire you immensely!"

"Thank you. Goodbye, Christobel. You are the image of your mother. If you were a little older, your father might be reached through you; as it is, I feel he is hopeless!"

Cherry looked after Mrs. Crawford disapprovingly.

"She always makes out father does wrong things," she said; "what does he do that he oughtn't to?"

"Oh, very few of us can please Mrs. Crawford. I can't; so your father and I are in the same boat. Have you ever heard a lot of clocks ticking away together, Cherry? Come into the hall with me. There now, listen to that old clock on the stairs! Do you think he is a lazy old slowcoach? This little French clock on the mantelpiece does. Listen to his fussy rattling tick; do you think he does more than the old clock?"

"He goes much quicker," said Cherry, listening as she was told, and looking up wonderingly into Miss Arnold's face.

"Not a bit of it! He takes just as long to get round the hour as the old clock does, and he will wear himself out in half the time. It is best to take life slowly and easily, don't you think so?"

Cherry looked very puzzled. Then Miss Arnold laughed.

"I am talking nonsense, child. I am trying to persuade myself that I am doing as much work in the day as Mrs. Crawford is; whereas the truth is that I

am a lazy idle drone, and I think your small finger has been the first one to point it out to me."

"But I've never pointed my finger at you—I really haven't," said Cherry gravely.

Miss Arnold laughed again.

"I tell you what we will do, Cherry. You and I will set to work together, and do a few good works on the quiet—shall we? Just to satisfy our own consciences that we are not cumberers of the ground. Is it a bargain? Now, where shall we begin? What shall we do first?"

"But," said Cherry breathlessly, "you gave Cousin—Cousin Anna some money. If I had money I would be quite happy, because I couldn't be a cumberer then."

"But it is money that makes people cumberers, you little innocent! If I had been a poor woman, I should not have so many idle years to account for! Now think hard. What can we do?"

Cherry's eyes grew bright and eager.

"I should like to do something good, really good," she said. "What kind of things did the people in the Bible do?"

"Bless the child! I can't be always hunting up my Bible to see. I do remember one woman in it who made coats and little garments; for an old nurse of mine was called after her, and her name was Dorcas. Well—let us start with her, and follow her example. We will make some clothes for the poor—for these small children who have lost their fathers. Can you work at all, Cherry?"

"Yes; but I don't do it very well."

"Don't look so sober. I am not very clever at my

needle, but we will try. And there is nothing like striking when the iron is hot. I will order the carriage round, and we will drive into Norton Wold, and buy some material at once. You shall help me to choose."

Cherry clapped her hands.

"That will be lovely!" she said.

So in a very short time Miss Arnold and her little friend were driving along the country road in her carriage.

"And we won't tell any one about it," said Cherry; "it is to be quite a secret."

"Yes, quite a secret. We must not let Mrs. Crawford hear a word about it, and then one day when we have two big parcels of frocks and petticoats, we will drive to the cottage, and you shall lay them on the doorstep, and come away like some unseen fairy."

"But if they do see me?"

"You mustn't let them. We will go when it is nearly dark."

It all seemed most entrancing to Cherry. And when she stood by Miss Arnold's side in the big linendraper's, and saw lengths of bright scarlet and blue merino being measured off for frocks, and helped to choose pretty pink and white cotton for pinafores, soft flannel for petticoats, and some dark crimson serge for warm cloaks, she thought this was one of the happiest days of her life.

"I will get my maid to cut the frocks out, and we will set to work at once. When can you come over to me again?" Miss Arnold asked, as she drove Cherry home.

"Will you ask Mr. Hastings, please?"

"I hope he is not a stern master, is he? Why, Cherry, how stupid of us! we have been getting red and blue

frocks instead of black for little girls who have lost their father! It is clear I am not cut out for a 'Dorcas.' What shall we do? They are so pretty too! I don't think I could work at a black frock, could you? Well, we will make them up, and find some one else to give them to."

When they reached Instanton, Miss Arnold sat in her carriage whilst Cherry ran indoors to find Mr. Hastings.

Colonel St. Leger, sauntering into the verandah, met her face to face. He came up to the carriage and held out his hand.

"Very good of you to trouble yourself with children," he said.

Miss Arnold looked at him with eyes full of laughter.

"I have been left too much to myself," she said. "Cherry is beginning my training. It is late in the day, but it is never too late to mend, is it?"

"Are you living alone?"

"Yes, in lonely wealth and state."

He smiled.

"You have not changed much," he said briefly.

"Thank you. And yet in some ways I wish I had. What is life to you at present, Colonel St. Leger?"

He shrugged his shoulders.

'A midday siesta," he replied. "The morning of my life has gone, and I will not allow that the evening has come."

"It has been twilight to me for many years."

There was a pause, which Cherry interrupted.

"Mr. Hastings says I may come to you next Saturday afternoon, if you will have me."

"I will send the carriage over for you then."

"Those are good horses of yours," said Colonel St. Leger, looking at the chestnuts with a critical eye.

"Yes. I am glad you approve of them. You used to be very keen in the hunting field. Is all that over?"

"Yes. India takes it out of a man as nothing else does. I mean to get a horse and trap shortly. Riding is forbidden."

They exchanged a few more words, then Miss Arnold drove away.

"Oh, father," said Cherry, dancing up and down in her excitement, "Miss Arnold is the very nicest person in the world, isn't she?"

But Colonel St. Leger did not express an opinion. He went back to his newspaper and pipe.

The days seemed to crawl to Cherry now. Would Saturday never come?

"Why doesn't she ask us?" said Phil, a little discontentedly, when Saturday arrived. "It's awfully slow in the country here. I wish I was back at Dr. Burton's again."

"It's because we have a secret that I am going to her," said Cherry importantly. "And it's a secret that would be no good to boys, for they couldn't do it."

"But I could," cried Bonnie; "and I wants to come, Cherry."

"Well, I've got some news," said Stacy consolingly. "I've just heard a new parson is coming to the Vicarage, and I believe there's a family. Hastings told me just now, for he walked up with the parson himself to the Vicarage gate.

"But we've got a clergyman," said Cherry.

"He's ill. Look how he croaks in church! He is

ordered abroad by the doctors, and this one is coming in his stead. Phil and I mean to go and see the furniture arrive this afternoon; and Bonnie, you can come with us, if you're very good. Cherry will just miss it."

There was a little satisfaction in his tone. The boys could not forgive Cherry for "taking up with a stranger," as they expressed it, and forsaking them. But Cherry did not heed their words. She departed in a great state of excitement.

Miss Arnold received her with much pleasure, and led her into her pretty morning-room, where a round table was drawn up to the window, upon which were laid piles of cotton and merino.

"I've brought my thimble," said Cherry, diving into her pocket and producing it as she spoke.

"That is right! Now we have to work hard. Jane has cut out everything, and tacked most of it together, for I am as ignorant as you are. Don't you think we might begin one of the little frocks?"

Cherry was only too pleased; she settled herself down in a low chair by the open French window, and threaded her needle with much importance. Miss Arnold handed her a little blue skirt to seam, and took a red one herself. She began telling Cherry some funny reminiscences of her own childhood, and half an hour passed very pleasantly. Then Cherry's fingers grew hot and sticky; her thread began to knot; she pricked herself; flies would tickle the back of her neck; she got fidgety and restless, and at last long sighs escaped her.

Miss Arnold looked up.

"You are looking quite warm, dear, and I am longing

to be out in the air. Let us bring our work out into the garden, and find a shady corner on the lawn."

This was a delightful change, but there were many interruptions. Oscar came up and wanted a game of play. Miss Arnold chased him across the lawn and tied him up; then in a few minutes she declared that they must have some fruit to eat, and she took Cherry off to pick some red currants. Their hands required washing after that, and they seemed to get very little work done before afternoon tea arrived.

"I don't think I like work much—do you, Cherry?" said Miss Arnold, with her merry twinkle in her eye.

"Oh no," sighed Cherry; "do you think mine is very bad?"

The little blue skirt seemed to be losing its freshness as she held it up anxiously for inspection.

"I don't think either of us would take a prize for fine needlework," said Miss Arnold, looking at it comically. "I think you take too many stitches, Cherry, and I take too few! Still, I think we must persevere a little longer. It is real hard work to us, isn't it?"

"Yes," assented Cherry heartily, "but it's Bible work, isn't it?"

"I suppose it is. Does that comfort you? There now, I have hemmed this inside out! What a duffer I am, to be sure! Oh, why wasn't I taught how to work properly!"

"Weren't you?" asked Cherry, with interest.

"No—well—in a kind of way I was. But I never would work. I always hated it. And from the time I left school I never touched it. I am afraid we shall not get through our pile very fast, little woman! Do you

think you could take some home with you? If we could both do a little every day, and have a regular afternoon for it every Saturday, we should accomplish a good deal."

"Yes, I could do it at home," said Cherry slowly; "but it wouldn't be a secret if the boys knew."

"Oh, yes it would, if you didn't tell them what it was you were making, and who it was for. There! Now let us stop. We are both tired out. Would you like to take some home?"

"Yes, please."

Visions of the boys, and Bonnie racing through the green meadows when lessons were over, and of herself sewing away in the hot close schoolroom, flitted before Cherry's eyes. She bravely stifled all regret in her tone, but Miss Arnold suddenly seized hold of her and kissed her.

"You are a little trump, Cherry! We both hate it, don't we? But we're going to do it, and carry it through, and clothe a whole family before we finish! And we can truly say that we have not been 'cumbering' this afternoon!"

Cherry's eyes shone. She was tired, very tired, but what did that matter? She wondered vaguely how much work would be equivalent to the first appearance of fruit on a tree.

"It will be like one small cherry, perhaps, if I work hard and never grumble for two Saturdays more," she said to herself, and she went home in the best of spirits.

CHAPTER IX

Some New Playfellows

"THERE'S a baby, and three small girls, and a big girl, and a boy about my size," said Stacy that evening at tea. "Phil and I saw them arrive, and they're sure to be in church to-morrow."

"And I spoke to the boy," said Phil. "His name is Angus, and his father teaches him lessons. He must be rather a muff."

"Where did you see him?" asked Cherry.

"I was buying some string at the post office, and he came to post a letter. He's rather a seedy-looking chap—at least his clothes are; but he knows how to carpenter a bit!"

This was a great recommendation in Phil's eyes.

"I'm glad there are some little girls," said Cherry.

"Yes," said Bonnie eagerly. "May I nod to them in church, Cherry? I think dear God would let me just this once!"

Bonnie had scandalised her more sedate sister by her system of nodding to every one in church with whom

she had the slightest acquaintance. When taken to task about it, she said pitifully—

"But how will they know that I knows them?"

"You oughtn't to know anybody but God in church," was the crushing reply. And now Cherry hastened to say, "You haven't got to nod to them anywhere, Bonnie, for you don't know them at all."

"But I shall know them to-morrow," Bonnie returned. "I've seen them all, and of course I shall know them again; and two little girls were just the same as the other, and they had curls like me."

It was not surprising, after this conversation, that the little St. Legers' eyes were fixed upon the vicarage pew throughout the service on the following day.

Mr. Allan, the new clergyman, was a tall thin weary-looking man, with a sweet smile and a soft, pleasant voice. His sermon was so simple that even Cherry listened and understood; but her attention was rather distracted by all the young faces opposite her. Colonel St. Leger had sittings in the chancel, facing the Vicar's family, so there was every opportunity for mutual inspection.

A sweet-faced girl of sixteen or seventeen came first; next to her sat a little girl of four, in white frock and sunbonnet; then two girls about Bonnie's size, who were evidently twins, and then the boy already mentioned by Phil. Mrs. Allan was not there. As they left the church, the little St. Legers passed them. Bonnie could not resist turning round and smiling seraphically into their faces; and her smiles were promptly returned.

She was very busy telling her father all about them that afternoon in the garden. He was in the verandah as usual, but he did not seem best pleased at her recital.

"I cannot have any more children running about," he said a little testily. "There is no occasion for you to make friends with them at all."

"But, father, they is really very nice. I do wish you had sat in church and looked at them. The two little girls I like were dressed in blue cotton frocks, and their hair was rough and tangly like mine. When are you coming to church, father? How soon will you be well enough?"

"Not just yet."

"Cherry says it is wicked to laugh in church. She says I oughtn't to smile. Doesn't God like to see peoples smile? Do you think He tells the angels not to do it?"

Bonnie seldom waited for answers to her questions. She continued—

"Father dear, will you read me about that poor little tree to-day? You said you would on Sunday."

"But you made me read it to you last Sunday," objected the Colonel.

"Yes, but I wants to hear it again. I loves it. I will go and fetch you the Bible."

She knew where her father kept her mother's Bible; and she laid it on his knee reverently.

The Colonel turned over the leaves.

"I didn't bargain for this every Sunday," he muttered to himself. He found the passage, and read it slowly through. Bonnie's head was in constant motion during the reading, sometimes shaking it pitifully, sometimes nodding approvingly.

"'This year also!'" she repeated. "'And if it bear fruit, well; and if not, then after that thou shalt cut it

down.' Cherry's little tree is being left, isn't it, father? Will you go and tell A.B.C. to cut it down, if it doesn't have any fruit next year?"

Then, after a pause, she said—

"Did you know you was a tree, father?—and Cherry and me and everybody? Cherry says we are, and she says Miss Arnold is a tree, too! What kind of a tree do you like to be, father? Will you purtend to be a cumber tree, and I'll come and talk about cutting you down?"

She danced away to the end of the verandah; then came back stamping down her little feet heavily on the pavement.

"I've come to look for fruit on this tree of mine," she commenced, in a very gruff tone; "it has been growing and growing, and it's quite a big old tree, and it hasn't had one fruit on it ever since I put it here, and I'm very much afraid it's a—a cumber tree!"

She paused, and regarded her father with comical gravity; then shook her head at him very deliberately.

"I shall have to cut you down if I don't find any fruit on you," she said. "It's no use for you to cry, and say you're sorry! I'm just going to have a very long look for fruit, and then I must cut you down, because I'm afraid you're a cumber tree!"

Bonnie was thoroughly enjoying her game now. She began a minute inspection of her father's person, and the Colonel lounged back in his chair lazily amused with it. She moved his head from side to side, she lifted up his arms, she opened his hands, she peeped in his pockets; she even tried to take off his boots. And at last she stood up.

"Now what have you got to say for yourself, cumber tree? You haven't got a tiny wee little bit of fruit about you!"

"I think," said the Colonel gravely, "you had better give me till next year. I'll try to do better."

"Will you really? On your word and honour? Then I'll come back next Sunday and see what you look like!"

The little game was over, but the baby lips had uttered words that were probing deeply. Her father sent her away with a smile, but when he was alone he took up his wife's well-read Bible and began perusing its pages. Goff found him strangely difficult to please for the rest of the day.

As for Bonnie, she danced off to her mother's garden, and surprised Cherry, who was kneeling by her tree with her arms round it.

"What are you doing, Cherry?"

Cherry looked a little flustered, but she seldom withheld her confidences from her younger sister.

"I'm just praying to God for my tree," she said, "and I'm telling it that I'm trying to grow fruit."

"Dear God is rather busy on Sundays," said Bonnie, looking up at the sky thoughtfully; "He has so many churches to go to. Do you think He is ready to listen to you, Cherry?"

"God is always ready," said Cherry, looking quite shocked at Bonnie's words.

"And when do you think He'll send an angel down with cherries?" Bonnie asked, going up to her tree and fingering with pride some little hard, green plums.

"Perhaps not till next year," said Cherry sorrowfully;

"A.B.C. says my tree couldn't possibly have any cherries this year; it's too late."

"My tree is very good," said Bonnie, "and so is Stacy's and Phil's."

There was much pride in her tone, and Cherry walked away, feeling once more that she and her tree were both failures together.

Before many days passed the Vicarage children and the little St. Legers became acquainted with each other. The twins were a great puzzle to Bonnie.

"I didn't never know there were twos of people in the world," she said to them. "If you're just as old and have got the same birthday, why don't you have the same name? I wish dear God had made two Bonnies, then I could always have some one to play with when Cherry is out."

She and Cherry went over one afternoon to the Vicarage and spent a very enjoyable time. Grace, the eldest girl, seemed always busy. Mrs. Allan was an invalid; there was quite a small baby, and they only kept one servant. Grace mothered her little sisters and kept things going; but they were miserably poor, and it was hard work making both ends meet. Cherry and Bonnie were not very observant. Ruth, Faith, and little Bessie were bright, lively children, and knew how to play games. That was enough for them; their patched shoes and darned stockings, their faded cotton frocks and shabby hats, were not of any moment to them. They had not yet arrived at the critical stage of youth; a torn frock was as good as a new one to them if it was comfortable, and they were delighted with their little friends

It made it doubly difficult to Cherry to sit at home working when the others were out at play. But she had brought home several tacked seams to hem, and every day, after her afternoon lessons were over, she determinedly set herself down to her task. She sighed a good deal over it, and wondered if it was really doing good, for she made but slow progress. The only thought that comforted her was that of presenting herself before Miss Arnold the following Saturday, with her work accomplished.

One afternoon she took it out to a garden seat at one end of the lawn. Abercrombie came up to her as he was mowing, and gave her a smile of approval.

"'Tis a useful leetle lassie," he said. "Ye'll tak' after yer bonnie mither, wha neever lived fur hersel' at all."

"Didn't she?" asked Cherry, with interest. "Who did she live for?"

"Fur her Creator's glory," the old man replied as he moved off, and Cherry pondered over the words.

"They're too grand for me," she said, with a little sigh, "and too grown up. But I like to be called useful."

She did not get much praise for her needlework from any one else. The boys were angry with her because she gave up fielding for them at cricket. Bonnie was almost tearful because she would no longer make clothes for Dinah. Nettie grumbled, saying she "wished if she had a mind to work she would mend her own stockings and put the buttons on her petticoats, for she could not get through the work; the young gentlemen wanted a woman to look after them entirely, they were so destructive!" And Cherry began to feel that perhaps,

after all, making clothes for the poor was not such a virtue as she had imagined.

One Monday she sat in the schoolroom with her work, but tears were very near the surface. Everything had gone wrong, and Bonnie as well as the boys had quarrelled with her. Lessons were not a success that morning. Cherry was spoken to very sharply by her tutor.

"You did not prepare properly on Saturday. I shall have to forbid your going out for the afternoon if it makes you so careless."

So after early dinner she was given an extra task to do, and she fretted over the time that might have been given to her work.

She was liberated at last, and the boys with her. Phil turned to her at once—

"Cherry, you're always sewing now. I want you to make me a bag. I've got the stuff, but it's an invention I'm making. I want to put some gunpowder in it, so it must be very strong. I've got everything ready but the bag. It's a kind of cannon or machine for firing off thousands of arrows. Of course mine is a small one, it sends off six at a time, and they'll go an awful distance. I'm going to the top of the church tower with Angus this afternoon, and we're going to try it. Hurry up, do, for I want to be off."

"I can't do it," said Cherry crossly. "Mr. Hastings has kept me at my lessons so long that I've hardly any time before tea, and I've a lot of work I want to do. Ask some one else."

"Oh, do, there's a brick! It won't take you long."

"I can't, I tell you. Go away!"

"Then you're a nasty, selfish, spiteful cat!"

Phil flung himself away from her in a rage. Stacy, who had heard, came up softly behind her, seized hold of the little print pinafore in her hand, and ran away with it with a delighted whoop and shout.

Cherry pursued him, with flaming cheeks and angry eyes.

"Give it to me at once, Stacy! You're a wicked boy! It isn't yours! Give it to me directly!"

Stacy waved it in the air.

"Three cheers for the crosspatch's rag!" he shouted; then racing into the farmyard, he flung it into the pig-stye. "That's where it ought to be and all your other rags too, for making you so beastly disagreeable!"

Then he fled, and Cherry rescued her pretty pinafore, and shed tears when she found it quite impossible to go on working it.

"I don't know what Miss Arnold will say! It's quite, quite spoilt, and I hate Phil, and I hate Stacy, and I'll never do anything they want me to do for them!"

She went up to the schoolroom, and got out a small flannel petticoat to work at. Just as she was sitting down, Bonnie put her rosy face inside the door.

"Cherry, father and me thinks it would be nice to go and pick some bluebells in the wood by the church. Father is going to sleep. Do come with me. Father and me thinks you oughted to!"

"I'm not going out."

"Oh, Cherry! do come. Leave your nasty work. It's always keeping you!"

Then Cherry turned upon her little sister angrily.

"It isn't nasty work at all. You and the boys can call me names if you like, but I shan't come with you

anywhere. You're always bothering me. Leave me alone!"

Bonnie opened her eyes.

"You are a very cross girl to-day," she remarked; "and father and me thinks you're much crosserer than you used to be!"

Cherry's temper now overflowed. She sprang forward with flashing eyes and struck her little sister. Bonnie burst into tears, and then fled from the room; whilst Cherry sat down again, threaded a needle with trembling fingers, and thought herself the most miserable child in the whole wide world.

CHAPTER X

A Sick House

SHE did not hear a door open and shut, but started suddenly when a hand was laid on her shoulder.

"My dear little friend, what is the matter?"

Cherry started, and saw, to her amazement, that it was Miss Arnold.

"Yes, you may well look surprised to see me. But I have been paying a visit to the Vicarage, and thought I would look in here on my way back. Why, Cherry! tears? Now tell me all about it."

Cherry had thrown her work down and burst into a passion of tears. In a few minutes she had told Miss Arnold all. She fetched the little soiled pinafore and showed it to her.

"They are horrid boys!" she sobbed, "and so is Bonnie, and I've been horrid too, and I don't think my work is any good at all, and I'm quite, quite miserable!"

Miss Arnold took her in her arms, and tried to comfort her.

"You are tired out, poor mite! You sit at your work too long. Now put it away, and come out with me.

We will *cumber* for the rest of the afternoon. Isn't that a delicious word? I find myself using it on every possible occasion."

"I'm sure I oughtn't to come out," Cherry sobbed; "I told Bonnie I wouldn't, and it would be a lie if I did. I've quarrelled with everybody, and they all hate me!"

"Nonsense! I shall take you for a tiny drive, and bring you back again much the better for it. My head is so full of a delightful idea of mine, that I want to tell you all about it. Run along, and get your hat on, and wash those tears away. I give you five minutes, for the carriage is waiting at the door!"

Cherry protested no more. She saw Miss Arnold meant what she said, and when she was seated amongst the soft cushions by her side, feeling the summer breeze fan her heated little face, she raised her head with a long-drawn sigh of relief.

"You ought not to shut yourself up in that hot, stuffy schoolroom this lovely weather," said Miss Arnold, looking down upon her. "It does you more harm than good. I shall give you no more work to take home, if you slave away at it so!"

"But I work so slowly and I can't get it done," said Cherry, with a very long face.

"There is no tearing hurry for it."

Cherry was silent. She looked out at the buttercup meadows, at the cows drinking by the river, and the village children playing on the bridge. Her little spirit was becoming soothed and quieted; but her conscience quickened.

"I've been very unkind and wicked," she said

presently "And I wish I had made Phil's bag for him."

"I saw him at the Vicarage when I called. Grace, the eldest girl, was making it for him. Poor girl! I felt very sorry for her. She was surrounded by the children and a mending basket; and the piles of little stockings in it looked, to my eyes, long past mending."

"And Bonnie is out alone," went on Cherry; "and father doesn't like her to wander by herself."

"I can relieve your mind about her. She was at the Vicarage, too, playing in the garden with the twins."

"I suppose she told them I hit her, and Phil has told them I wouldn't make his bag; and now they'll all hate me too!"

Cherry's tone was very sad.

"Now I did not bring you out to keep thinking of your woes," said Miss Arnold brightly. "Let us talk of something else. Would you not like to hear of what is filling my head at present? Now listen! Your little playfellows at the Vicarage, and their father and mother and whole family, are in it. I'm afraid they're very, very poor."

"Nettie says they are," said Cherry gravely. "She says her mother would give her little brothers and sisters better clothes than they have to wear. And Nettie's cousin, who goes there to clean, says they have no butter for breakfast, only dripping; and bacon instead of meat for dinner. I think I should like that. They can't be very poor, Miss Arnold, for they have such a nice big house and garden!"

"Well, listen, Cherry, only it must be a great secret between us. We will give the clothes we are making to

them; I think they will be more suitable. But they must not find out who sends them. I shall make up a parcel and send it by post. Do you think you could keep the secret?"

Cherry looked a little doubtful.

"They will see me working," she said.

"I am not going to give you any more to do at home. It is a mistake; it is too much for you."

"Oh, no, please let me do it! I won't cry about it any more, and I'll try not to be cross with Bonnie and the boys."

But Miss Arnold was firm.

"You shall come to me every Saturday. If you give up your half-holiday once a week, that is quite enough. Don't you think it will be very nice to make frocks for your little friends?"

"They are not *quite* poor people," said Cherry.

The plan did not commend it to herself at first. She would have been better pleased to clothe some ragged beggars. But Miss Arnold had set her heart upon it; and talked away until at last Cherry began to take a deep interest in it all.

"And it is nice," she said, "to have a real secret about it with you."

It was not till they were coming home, that a shadow again crossed Cherry's sensitive little face.

"Miss Arnold, I heard a sermon yesterday."

"Did you? So did I. Was yours a nice one?"

"I couldn't understand it—and yet I did a little. Mr. Allan talked about fruit. Mr. Hastings always makes us learn the text of the sermon for our Sunday lessons. Shall I say it to you?"

"Yes, dear."

Cherry folded her small hands together and repeated reverently—

"'The fruit of the spirit is love, joy, peace, long-suffering, gentleness, goodness, faith, meekness, temperance.' Mr. Allan talked in his sermon about fruit for God. He said everybody, even children, could bear this fruit. But then he said a lot more about vine and branches. He read it in the Bible, and I don't know where it comes. He said something about none of us being able to bear fruit without Jesus. I can't remember any more. But I was thinking to-day, and it made me unhappy, that the Bible doesn't say anything about needlework being a fruit. Do you think it is? You know. I shouldn't like not to have proper fruit."

"My dear child," said Miss Arnold, a little impatiently, "you are a regular little self-torturer! Why do you get hold of such perplexing theology? We don't want to cumber the ground, by doing nothing, so we're doing something, and that something is clothing the poor. Don't you upset my self-satisfaction in my own virtue! Your text mentions goodness, and love. We're doing good to our neighbours, because we love them. So we are certain to be right."

"It says such a lot of different things," said Cherry; "I'm sure I shall never have all of them; and if I am a proper fruit tree I ought to have!"

The carriage stopped, for Cherry had reached her home. Miss Arnold bent forward and kissed her.

"There, run along! You are looking better already, if you won't worry yourself into fiddlestrings over sermons

that are above your head! And not a stitch of work are you to do till you come over to me next Saturday. Now remember!"

Cherry promised, and went into the house feeling relieved. Tea was ready in the schoolroom, but only Bonnie was there. She looked up a little frightened as Cherry entered.

"Oh, Bonnie, I'm so sorry. Forgive me, darling!"

The sisters kissed each other lovingly, and peace was made. Bonnie began giving an excited account of all she had been saying and doing, and then Mr. Hastings came in.

"Where are the boys?" he asked.

"They are up on the top of the church tower," said Bonnie. "They is going to shoot at the enemy. I don't know where he is, but they said they would do for him."

At that moment the door was flung open, and the boys rushed in. Phil looked a little scared.

"I'm afraid I've done something stupid," he said, turning to his tutor appealingly; "but it shows that my invention is all right."

"What have you done?" asked Mr. Hastings briefly.

"I've fired off some arrows—awfully good ones they were, and they smashed old Crew's greenhouse just the other side of the churchyard. He's in an awful wax, and says he'll make me pay forty shillings, and I'm afraid he'll go to father. Could you go out and make it right with him?"

"You don't expect me to pay him forty shillings, do you?" said Mr. Hastings drily. "Now I wonder why you could not have kept out of mischief to-day?

Yesterday I had to send you to apologise to the sexton for ringing his bell; Saturday you——"

"Oh, please, please forget!" said Phil, dancing up and down with impatience. "He is at the back door now; don't remind me of all my past wickedness, but do save me from one of father's looks!"

"Father looks lovely always!" put in Bonnie impetuously.

Mr. Hastings shrugged his shoulders, and went out of the room.

"Hastings is a trump!" said Stacy. "You were such a duffer, Phil! it's a mercy you didn't smash up Crew besides his greenhouse!"

"If I had, he wouldn't have wanted forty shillings!" said Phil thoughtfully.

"Well, look here, I'm awfully hungry. Let's begin tea."

They drew up their chairs to the table.

"Are you in a better temper, crosspatch?" Stacy said to Cherry.

"Yes," was Cherry's quiet reply. "I'm not cross now, and I'm sorry I was cross this afternoon. I'm not going to do any more work, so I shan't be so busy."

"Oh, I'll give you plenty to do for me," said Phil. "You needn't stop working. My pockets are full of holes. That ass of a Nettie pretends to mend them; but she's no good at all. My stockings would give auntie a fit, if she were to see them."

They chattered away till Mr. Hastings came in.

"Your pocket money must be stopped for a month, Phil. I hope it will teach you a lesson."

Phil looked very dismayed.

"What did he say! He is an old beast!'

"Hush! You are in fault, not he!"

Tea was rather a silent meal after this. When the little girls were going to bed, Bonnie said—

"Cherry, I'm glad dear God didn't make me a boy. They does do such scrapes, and they always comes out wrong!"

"Well," said Cherry, sighing, "Phil has been naughty to-day, but I've been worse. It's a very difficult thing to be good, very."

"But dear God will make us good when we get to heaven," said Bonnie cheerfully.

And with this comforting assurance Cherry fell asleep.

One day, about a week after this, Miss Arnold gave a strawberry party. The Vicarage children as well as the little St. Legers were invited; and they thoroughly enjoyed their day.

There were several grown-up people there, and amongst them, Mrs. Crawford. She gazed at Miss Arnold in astonishment, as she saw her surrounded by the children, and just before she left, she spoke to her.

Miss Arnold was tying up one of Bessie Allan's shoes. Cherry was standing by her side, imploring her to come and play hide and seek with them.

"Do come and hide with me; it will be much greater fun if you come."

"Of course I will. Oh, Mrs. Crawford, must you be going?"

"My dear Blanche," said Mrs. Crawford, with slow emphasis, "allow me to congratulate you on your party. And may I say how pleased I am to see you at last rousing yourself to take interest in others, and in not

living so entirely for self! I have always regretted that with health and strength, and moderate wealth, you should have led such an idle, useless existence. How often I tried to interest you in our schools and parish matters! May I hope——"

"No, Mrs. Crawford," interrupted Miss Arnold laughing; "you may hope nothing about me. I shall only disappoint you. I have my freaks. Be thankful if they are not wicked ones!"

She shook hands with her, and wished her goodbye.

When she had gone, Miss Arnold turned to Cherry—

"There are some people in the world who always make me long to be wicked, Cherry. I feel as if I must *cumber* all my days now! Do you know the feeling?"

Cherry could not say she did, but she took Miss Arnold off to join in their game, and thought her the very funniest, dearest person in the world!

The little St. Legers returned home about seven in the evening, very tired and happy. Phil seemed the only one out of sorts. He complained of a sore throat and headache, and was decidedly cross. The next morning Stacy knocked at his tutor's door.

"Please, Mr. Hastings, come and see Phil. He says he won't get up, and I can't make him."

Mr. Hastings obeyed this summons at once. He found Phil with a hot, flushed face, heavy eyes, and an aching head.

"I'm going to be ill," he said gruffly. "I believe those strawberries poisoned me yesterday!"

Mr. Hastings laughed at him, but told him to be still, and came into the schoolroom with an anxious face. He wrote a note to the doctor, and asked Goff to take it: and he seemed preoccupied at breakfast.

The children were very much excited over Phil. None of them had ever remembered being ill.

"He was quite silly in the night," said Stacy; "he woke me up by yelling out that Angus was spoiling his arrow machine, and then he said I was trying to boil his head in a saucepan! I expect he's going to have an awful illness. Perhaps he has got a sunstroke——"

"Or smallpox," said Cherry; "or appleplexy!"

"Perwaps he'll die," said Bonnie, with big eyes.

"I know what he's got," said Stacy suddenly. "It's scarlet fever. It's in the village; they've got it at the shop we get our sweets from. Phil was there two days ago, and Mrs. Sykes was telling him about her youngest boy."

"Why did you not tell me?" asked Mr. Hastings sharply. "You ought not to have been there."

Stacy was right in his conjecture. When the doctor came he pronounced it to be a case of scarlet fever. Stacy and the little girls were removed to the farthest end of the house. The doctor said they had been so much together, that it was no good sending them away, until he was perfectly sure they were free from infection.

The Colonel was consulted by Mr. Hastings.

"Would you like me to attend to him, Colonel? I have no fear of infection. I should like to be with him, but in that case I cannot be with the other children. Would you prefer a nurse being got?"

Colonel St. Leger looked worried.

"You really must settle things, Hastings, without coming to me. I hate strange women in the house. They upset everybody. Let the lessons go; and if you will attend to the boy I shall be grateful."

Stacy danced round the schoolroom with delight when he heard there were going to be no lessons. He started off for the Vicarage at once in search of Angus; but was disgusted when the Vicar came himself to the door, and told him he could not be admitted.

"You are in quarantine, my boy. I am sorry, but I would rather you did not come near my little ones yet. Dr. Ball has just called and warned me!"

Stacy came home very indignant. Cherry and Bonnie did their best to console him; but two days after, his throat was sore, and he was removed to the sick part of the house.

"I hope I shall get ill next," Cherry confided to Bonnie. "It must be so nice to stay in bed and be nursed, and have beef-tea and jelly in the middle of the morning. It is so very dull without the boys."

Every morning she felt her throat with her fingers, and looked anxiously into the glass to see if she was red and hot like the boys had been. And then one afternoon Bonnie refused to play, and climbed into an easy chair in the schoolroom.

"My head hurts," she said.

Cherry felt quite angry with her.

"You're pretending, Bonnie. Why should your head hurt more than mine does? You're pretending to be ill!"

"I is very ill," said Bonnie, in aggrieved tones.

When she was taken away, and Cherry left alone in the empty schoolroom, she felt quite ill-used, and burst into tears.

"It's a shame! Why should they all be ill and leave me alone? Why shouldn't I be ill before Bonnie? Oh, I do hope I shall catch it too!"

But she did not catch it. She wandered about the house feeling lonely and miserable; and the climax seemed to be when Miss Arnold wrote her the following little note in round, printed letters:—

"My dearest little Cherry,—How sorry I am for you! And doubly sorry that I am going from home on a short visit to friends in London. But in any case our working party must stop. You could not sew as long as there is any fear of infection. I hope you are not going to take it too. I am very glad to hear that it is a very mild form, and hope your brothers will soon be better. I am taking some work with me to London, so that I shall not *cumber* there. Much love, hoping to see you after my return.

"Your loving friend,
"Blanche Arnold."

Cherry sobbed afresh after she read this.

"And now I shall be farther off than ever from getting fruit," she said mournfully to herself. "I'm no good to anybody. I always seem left out. I can't even be ill like the others."

CHAPTER XI

A Talk with Father

CHERRY'S mind was not allowed to dwell upon herself and her own shortcomings for long. Bonnie was very ill indeed, and not expected to recover. The Colonel had received the daily bulletins from the sick-rooms with great composure, but when Bonnie was ill he grew anxious. She had wound herself round his heart, and he missed her daily companionship intensely. Cherry was with him a great deal, but she could not take Bonnie's place. When he heard her life was in danger, he seemed utterly crushed. He sent Goff for Cherry. She came with tear-stained eyes, and ran straight into his arms.

"Oh father, father, do say Bonnie won't die!"

A great lump rose in the Colonel's throat.

"What can we do?" he said helplessly. "What can we do to save her?"

Cherry looked up, with hope dawning in her dark eyes.

"Send for auntie, father! She said she would come if we wanted her. She will know what to do. Oh, do send for her!"

The Colonel despatched a telegram instantly by Goff then paced his room with hasty, uneven steps.

Cherry sat watching him. Presently he turned to her.

"I believe she will die. She is so unnatural; always talking about her 'dear God.' If your mother were alive, Cherry, she would pray about it. I believe that would—er—be a good thing to do."

"Shall we pray, father?"

Cherry's voice was timid. The Colonel stopped in his walk, and looked at her.

"I don't know much about it," he said; "but I think you could manage a prayer, couldn't you?"

It was pitiful to see the strong grown man appealing helplessly to the tiny child.

Cherry nodded.

"I'll ask God, father. He can make her better, if nobody else can, can't He?"

She knelt down by her father's couch; he turned irresolutely, locked the door; then knelt by her side.

And Cherry prayed—

"Oh God, please don't let Bonnie die; father and me want her to live, please make her better. We ask you please to get her well again as quick as you can. For Jesus Christ's sake. Amen."

The Colonel remained on his knees with his face hidden in his hands. A groan escaped him, and Cherry heard him say—

"A miserable sinner—will be different—can't really live without her."

When he rose to his feet he began to talk about Bonnie, and Cherry was only too glad to tell him all she could about her.

"Bonnie always has been good ever since she was born. She never gets cross, and she loves God very much. She's always talking about Him."

She talked on till Goff came back to his master, and she was summoned to go to her early dinner. Cherry never forgot that miserable day. It was grey outside as well as in, for it was raining fast; she sat in the empty schoolroom looking out of the window, and wondering what she would do if Bonnie died. Nettie came in from time to time, but she had no comfort to offer her; only the assurance that Mrs. Tipkins was quite certain that "Miss Bonnie was sinkin' fast!"

She had her early dinner, and sat on looking out at the misty hills and dripping trees, wondering in a vague kind of way if the blue sky, of which Bonnie was so fond, knew what was going on, and was weeping at the thought of her death.

Tea-time came. She asked Goff if she might go to her father.

"Sure, Missy, I'd be the one to let ye in as aisy as me bed is to meself, but the Colonel be powerfu' upset, an' he sez to me, 'Goff,' he sez, 'ye'll kape me door fast to all but the docthor!'"

Cherry sighed. She sat down to her tea, but hardly touched it. Was she always going to be alone? Would Stacy and Phil get worse and die too? Would they all leave her? Tears gathered and fell, and then suddenly the door opened, and Mrs. Burton, with her motherly face and smile, appeared.

"My poor little Cherry, I have come to you!'

Cherry clung to her with deep sobs.

"Don't go! Don't shut yourself up away from me!

They have all gone! Oh don't go away and leave me!" Mrs. Burton sat down, took her on her lap, and soothed her. "Darling, do you remember Bonnie? You would not keep me from her, would you? You were always brave and unselfish; you will show me that you are going to be brave now. Dear little sunny Bonnie! I hear she has no nurse, and Mr. Hastings is nearly worn out."

"There's a woman from the village," said Cherry; "she went to Bonnie yesterday—but oh, I will be brave, auntie—only kiss me! I have wanted you so much!"

"I must have a cup of tea before I go to Bonnie; will you give me one?"

Cherry dried her tears. Mrs. Burton insisted upon her eating something with her, and she talked away till the child had recovered her composure; then she drew her to her.

"Now I am going to my work, and you must do yours. We must both pray that Bonnie's life may be spared. You have your father to wait on and to comfort. He is very sad. I have just been talking to him; but he would like you to go and sit with him till your bed-time. I will let you know very often how Bonnie is getting on. Good-night, dear. Cheer up, and we will hope that very soon Bonnie will have turned the corner."

She kissed her and left her, for her time was precious. But Cherry's misery was past. "Auntie" was here; she would see to everything, and Bonnie might get better. She ran out into the passage and called for Nettie to come and help her change her frock. Then she ran lightly downstairs to her father's room, with a brighter face than she had had for many days.

In a few days' time the danger was past and Bonnie

was slowly recovering. Cherry and her father were much together now; she was learning how to do things for him, and her old-fashioned quaintness amused and interested him. One day they went for a drive. He had for some time been carefully selecting a pair of horses, and when once his choice was made he was anxious to try them. It was a lovely afternoon when he took his little daughter out with them for the first time.

Cherry was delighted. She sat up by her father's side feeling very grand and important. And it was during the drive that her father began to talk to her in a way that he had never done before. Perhaps it was her sedateness that made him forget her age; he talked to her as if she were nearly grown up, and Cherry was delighted.

"I hope my health is mending. I did not seem to care much about it when I first came home, but I am beginning to realise that life is not yet over for me. I do not often talk to you about your mother, but she was a saint, and my hope is that you may grow up to follow in her steps. I am never—and remember my words, Cherry—I am never going to put any stranger in her place. That is why I have kept you children without any lady to look after you. You are the eldest girl, and I want you to become accustomed from the very beginning to stand alone. I want you to grow up and step into your mother's place. I shall expect you to be the mistress of the household later. Try to learn everything you can about housekeeping, so that it will come easily to you. Your mother knew how to make home comfortable; she arranged and saw to everything. I am afraid she spoilt me. I never had to think of a thing. She was better at

money matters than I was, and when I lost her I felt quite at sea!" He paused, and sank into a sad reverie. Cherry's little voice roused him. She was speaking in a quick, earnest tone, and her eyes glowed with feeling.

"Oh, father, I will try! I will get on with my sums as fast as I can. Does the rule of three, and fractions help you to understand money? I will do my very best. I wish I could grow up quicker, now you want me to be grown up. I will ask Mrs. Tipkins to teach me things. And father, I will try to spoil you too. I will let you do nothing at all, nothing! And I will do everything!"

Her little heart swelled with pride and yearning as she spoke, and Colonel St. Leger felt ashamed as he listened to her last emphatic words. He laughed it off.

"*You* spoil me!" he said. "Can a mouse spoil a lion? And yet, Cherry, you little people can do a good deal towards making your elders happy!"

Cherry looked puzzled.

"I thought grown-up people were always happy," she said.

The Colonel shook his head, but relapsed into silence. Cherry did not break it till the drive was nearly over. Then she said reflectively—and more to herself than her father—"There's one thing, I couldn't possibly be a cumberer if I do all you want me too! I'm sure I couldn't be one if I do everything properly, only it is such a long time to wait!"

Her father did not ask her what she meant. He did not much like the subject of "cumberers."

It was a day or two after this that Cherry received a letter from Miss Arnold. She was delighted with it, but was unable to read it, as Miss Arnold did not write a very

clear hand, and had forgotten to print it as she had done before. For a long time she sat in the schoolroom puzzling over it; she asked Nettie to help her, but Nettie was no scholar, and at last she stepped along quietly to her father's room and begged admission.

"Father, could you read this to me?" she asked. "I wish I was cleverer. I suppose Miss Arnold forgets how stupid I am."

She looked so despondent that Colonel St. Leger put down his morning paper without a grumble and read aloud:—

"DEAR LITTLE CHERRY,—I do feel so sorry for you, for I know how lonely you must be. And I feel you will think I am not a friend for adversity, as I have left your neighbourhood when perhaps you need me most! I thought you would like to know that I have made up a big bundle of our clothes, have added a few more in London, and am packing a box which I shall send——"

"Please, father, stop!" interrupted Cherry with crimson cheeks, "it's a secret and I don't know what to do."

"Oh, well," said Colonel St. Leger carelessly as he handed her the letter back, "you should not ask me to read it if the contents are to be a mystery."

Cherry was rather near tears.

"But I can't read it myself. It's only a secret I don't want the boys to know, because they will tell. You won't tell, father, will you? Oh do read it to me, please; I must hear it!"

So the Colonel took it back from her and continued: "which I shall send anonymously from town to the

Vicarage. You must tell me if you hear anything about it, only be sure to keep our secret tight! I am afraid I shall be away for some time longer. I have come across an old governess of mine who is ill and who wants sea air, so I am looking after her and am going to take her away with me for a little. I want to make up for all past 'cumbering' if I can! By the bye, dear, I have been looking into the verse you spoke to me about, and strangely enough came across it in a book that I bought the other day. I have come to the conclusion that bearing fruit is not so easy, and needlework for the poor is only a very tiny part of it; something like the core of an apple! The list of fruits you discovered are the genuine ones, but how to arrive at them is the problem! However, we will both try hard. I think they will come easier to you than to me!

"Your loving friend,

"BLANCHE."

"What is she talking about?" asked the Colonel, as he folded up the letter and handed it back to Cherry.

"It's a text I learnt," said Cherry, a little shyly. "It is one we had in church. I think I remember it. 'The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, longsuffering, gentleness, goodness, faith, meekness, temperance!' But I don't understand them coming easy to me. They're very, very hard, I should think; much harder than making petticoats!"

Her father said no more, and she left him, tucking her precious letter into her pocket, and wondering if the little Allans had received their wonderful box.

"I wish I could see them," she thought; "but it is

no good—I mustn't go near them and I shall never hear about it!"

But she did hear.

She was playing by herself in the garden a few days after, and had wandered down to the iron gate at the end of the drive, when she heard her name called in shrill trebles; and looking out, she saw the Vicarage twins walking by.

"I mustn't speak to you," said Cherry, retreating hastily.

"Oh, yes, if we stay this side of the road, and we'll scream to make you hear us," cried Ruth, "for we want to tell you something lovely!"

"Yes," said Faith excitedly, "we've had a lovely big surprise, and I think a fairy godmother must have sent it!"

"Mother doesn't know, and father doesn't, and Grace doesn't, where it comes from, and it was written, 'Mrs. Allan, with best wishes from a friend.'"

"And oh, such a box! and quite new frocks and pinafores and petticoats! We've never had new clothes before, and two red frocks fit us egsackly, and a shawl for mother, and lots of things for baby, and a big iced cake, and story books!"

"And it was sent by nobody—and oh! Faith, mother said she didn't want us to chatter about it!"

"But Cherry won't chatter, will she? Isn't it puffickly beautiful?"

Cherry's face was beaming.

"Will you come to church in your new frocks next Sunday?"

"If mother will let us. Mother cried, but Grace and

father didn't like it much, and then they did. They couldn't help it, and the cake is lovely, and Bessie has a white frock, and there are some real kid gloves that Grace is going to put on. Real kid, she said they were!"

Cherry listened to these outbursts with great delight. She asked them to describe all the frocks and pinafores again to her; and when they had done so and had left her, she went back to the house saying to herself—

"When I grow up and get some money I shall send boxes to everybody who wants them!"

CHAPTER XII

In a Farmhouse

THE boys and Bonnie were convalescent. Mrs. Burton came out of the sick-room and suggested to the Colonel that they should be sent to a farmhouse not very far away to regain their strength, whilst their rooms were being cleaned and repapered. She knew the people who kept the farm, and Colonel St. Leger willingly agreed. But she had hardly made the necessary arrangements for the move before Mr. Hastings collapsed. He had been indefatigable in nursing the boys, and had by this time thought he was quite free from infection, but the doctor came and told him he had caught the fever.

Colonel St. Leger was worried at once.

"Who is to go with the boys? Hastings sees to everything. It is really most unfortunate."

"Will you not go yourself, Colonel?" said Mrs. Burton. "Your man would make you comfortable there, and the doctor thinks it would be quite safe for Cherry to join you in a fortnight's time. The children would be very good, and Mrs. Watkins, the farmer's wife, would look after them."

The Colonel fumed and grumbled, and begged Mrs. Burton to accompany them. This she said she could not do.

"I will nurse Mr. Hastings through the worst. He seems to have no friends, poor young fellow! and I could not leave him; but directly I am off duty here I must return to my husband."

So at last the Colonel said he would go. Poor Cherry watched the departure through the window, and though not allowed to go near Bonnie and the boys, she was able to talk to them as they stood outside watching their luggage being piled on the cab. Bonnie looked very small and white, and was enveloped in wraps; the boys seemed much the same, but without their usual colour. They all waved their hands to Cherry.

"You're coming in a fortnight!" they cried.

Colonel St. Leger stooped to kiss his little daughter.

"Goff must try to manage us all till you can come and help him," he said cheerily. "In ten days' time we shall expect you."

That fortnight seemed the longest that Cherry had ever spent. She turned to Abercrombie for comfort, and many were the long theological discussions they held together in the sunny garden. Fruit-bearing, of course, was their chief topic.

"How shall ye ken ye are fruit-bearin', lassie? Ay, if ye be called an' chosen by th' Almighty, if the Speerit be abidin' in ye, then the fruits of the Speerit will show their ain selves!"

"But how shall I know I have the Spirit?" Cherry would ask anxiously.

Abercrombie's information on this point was vague

and unsatisfactory. He talked a great deal about the elect and the predestined, and Cherry tried to understand, and could not, and was depressed in consequence.

At last the fortnight came to an end, and Nettie was busy packing her box to join the others at the farmhouse.

Cherry came round the garden for the last time, and Abercrombie found her standing by her little tree with a grave face. She turned at his approach.

"A.B.C., I've been thinking. Have you done what the gardener did to the fig-tree in the Bible? You never seem to do anything to my little tree."

"Na," said Abercrombie, rubbing his head and looking at it critically. "I canna say I ever have. 'Tis a sad peety it be so unfruitful."

"But won't you dig it about, and try to make it have cherries next year? Why shouldn't it? It isn't a dead tree. I do want it to have fruit so much."

Her tone was pathetic. The old gardener took a branch in his hand and looked at it; then he bent down and touched the soil with his fingers.

"Weel, Missie, I wull not say it be past carin' for. An' I wull dig about it a bit an' pit some reecher soil. We wull see nex' year what it comes to. I am thinkin' it may not have ower much sun aboot it. An' I wull be loppin' a few branches from that beech, an' then when the sunlicht jist streams on the puir crittur, happen 'twill blossom in the springtide!"

"Oh, thank you!" said Cherry gratefully. "I should be so pleased if it had cherries next year!"

Then she put her little hand into the gardener's brown hard-working one.

"Good-bye, A.B.C.; I'm so glad to be going away. And we'll all come back together. Won't that be nice?"

"We wull pray that ye may," said Abercrombie, shaking his head; "but I doot the master's wisdom in takin' that gowk to look after ye all. He hath no stabeelity o' purpose, an' his kind are verra onreliable!"

"Shall I give your love to Goff?" asked Cherry, a little mischievously.

"I bear him no ill," said Abercrombie, turning away. "I fain would see him steady doon, an' be not so ready wi' fools' laughter!"

Nettie was to go with Cherry to the farm. Mrs. Tipkins saw them off at the station with many injunctions, and when they set off Nettie's face was grave with anxious care. But Cherry was in wild spirits. Her term of imprisonment was over. She felt like a wild bird set free from a cage. It was not a long journey, and when they arrived at their destination Mr. Watkins was awaiting them in his spring-cart, and Stacy was by his side.

The brother and sister greeted each other affectionately. Stacy, as usual, had plenty to say. Directly they drove off he began—

"It's stunning here, Cherry; the apples are all getting ripe, and the orchard is full of them, and father is taking to fishing. There is a splendid trout stream two fields off, and he is out all day, and yesterday Goff took his dinner to him, and we carried ours, and we had it by the river. And I have borrowed a rod from Mr. Watkins, and I'm going to fish to-morrow. And Mrs. Watkins makes ripping hot plum-cakes. She sends them in hot, too; she's a brick! There's a huge

mastiff called 'Sawdust.' Mrs. Watkins said the first time she saw him he came rolling up to her, a little blind puppy covered with sawdust, and the name has stuck to him. He is awfully fond of me, and Phil and I have been making a little cart on wheels. It's a box, you know, but big enough for Bonnie to sit in, and we're going to teach Sawdust to draw it. He is such fun! And do you know the corn is going to be cut next week, and there's going to be a big harvest supper, and we're all asked!"

He paused for breath. Cherry felt she had come into a land of delight.

"We shall have no lessons," she said; "what long holidays it will be."

"How is old Hastings? Poor chap! he was awfully good to us. I was beastly when I was ill. I threw a book at his head one day, and he never got waxy!"

"He is better. Mrs. Burton is nursing him, and she told me to tell you to write some letters to him to amuse him."

"He'll be looking at the spelling. I'll tell Phil to. He is busy in the barn this afternoon, trying to make a machine to shell beans and peas, and Bonnie is playing with two goats in the orchard. One is a black one with a white beard, called 'Sambo,' and the other is a white one called 'Susy.' Here we are! I'll jump down and open the gate."

He was out of the cart in a minute, and there, behind a wooden gate, stood Bonnie, waving her handkerchief in the air. Cherry begged to be allowed to jump down, and the next minute she was clasping her arms round her sister.

Oh, Bonnie, I'll never be cross to you again!"

"It was a pity you didn't get ill," said Bonnie, in the midst of many kisses. "We missed you quite dreadfully, Cherry."

They walked up to the old farmhouse that looked out upon the orchard with the goats, and apples, and Mrs. Watkins met them at the door. She was a pleasant, smiling woman, and Cherry felt no shyness when she held out her hand to her.

"Come in, little Missie. The Colonel is out, and the tea is all ready."

Cherry looked with admiring eyes round the room to which she was taken. It was large and old-fashioned, and had cases of stuffed birds and owls on the sideboard. Colonel St. Leger had his own sitting-room on the other side of the hall, but this was the children's own.

The boys came in, ready for their tea, and the little tongues were busy the whole time. Before they had finished their meal the Colonel put his head in. He seemed to have lost his languor and fatigue, and spoke in quite a brisk, cheerful tone—

"So we have got you at last, little woman. Now you must keep us all in order!"

He drew her to him and kissed her. Cherry looked up at him affectionately.

"I thought the time would never come," she said.

The evening was spent in showing her round the farm. Goff welcomed her with his usual broad smile.

"Arrah, Miss Cherry, an' how do ye think the Cornel be looking? Faith! an' it's this place that suits him ontoirely!"

"Do you like it, Goff?"

"Well, I'll no be sayin' I've seed foiner! But the trout be gran', an' I'm a bit o' a fisher meself. Indade the Cornel have betaken himself outdoors, an' nothin' will kape him in. An' the change be mighty pleasant!"

When the little girls were in bed that night in a large, old-fashioned bed, Bonnie said thoughtfully—

"Has dear God ever been ill, Cherry?"

Cherry looked quite shocked.

"What things you say, Bonnie! Of course God is never ill. He couldn't be."

"Is it wicked to be ill, then?"

"No, of course it isn't. God makes you ill."

"Why does He? It isn't nice at all. I asked and asked Him to make me better, and when He didn't I cried, and then I thought He might be very ill Himself, and couldn't hear me."

"But God did make you better, Bonnie. Father and I asked Him to, and He did hear us."

"But He was such a long time. I was ill for *years* and *years!*"

"It wasn't so long as that, Bonnie. P'r'aps God wanted you to lie still and be good. If you are in bed you can't be naughty. There's nothing to make you.

"I thinks I was rather cross," admitted Bonnie; "but the boys is dreadfully cross now. Phil slapped me yesterday, and he said his headache made him."

"Does Phil have a headache?" asked Cherry wonderingly. "I thought only grown-up people had that."

"He said he had, and Mrs. Watkins said it was the sun. Father and me thinks, Cherry, that it will be nice

to live in this house for ever and ever, and do no lessons at all."

"I'm tired," said Cherry sleepily.

But Bonnie pulled hold of her arm.

"And Cherry, listen! We never has prayers at all, and father and me thinks you will have to read them!"

Even this awful suggestion failed to rouse Cherry.

"Good night!" she murmured, and soon there was silence in the room. The children slept.

The next morning after breakfast, Cherry and Bonnie knocked at their father's door. Bonnie insisted upon Cherry coming with her, and almost the first words she said to her father were—

"Please, dear father, here's Cherry to have prayers.

The Colonel frowned, then his eyes fell on Cherry.

"You are getting to look like your mother," he said. "If Hastings always had them with you, we had better go on with it. Call the boys, Bonnie."

Cherry's knees literally shook under her.

"I—I—haven't the book Mr. Hastings reads out of father."

The Colonel was sitting in an easy chair by his window. He did not answer, but looked out dreamily.

A vision of his young wife with her Bible on her knee rose before his eyes. He turned to his little daughter.

"Yes," he said. "I should like you to read them, Cherry. I want you to grow up like your mother. There are some little devotional books of hers on that shelf. I always carry them about with me, and her Bible is there too. You may find a book of prayers."

Cherry went to the shelf, and after some trouble found a little crimson leather book containing some

prayers. It was for private and personal use, but she did not understand that. It was a relief to her mind to find that there was one. And then the door opened and Bonnie ushered in the boys, who were in a giggling frame of mind. They said "good morning" to their father; and his look brought gravity into their faces at once. They seated themselves on two chairs, and stared with great curiosity at Cherry. It was a terrible ordeal to her, but since she had had that talk with her father, she felt she ought never to falter if he asked her to do anything. His words, "I want you to grow up like your mother," would have sent her cheerfully to the stake, had that been the way to follow her mother's footsteps.

Bonnie drew up a chair to her father's side. Cherry sat opposite, with the Bible and little red book in front of her.

"What shall I read, father?" she asked in a trembling voice.

"I don't know," the Colonel said. "There is a marker in the Bible. Begin there."

It was the third chapter of St. John.

Cherry read it steadily through. The boys fidgeted, but when they knelt down, and Cherry began the prayer, they looked at each other in astonishment.

Her little voice faltered here and there; otherwise she read it softly and reverently. The Colonel, as he bent his knees, felt as if this was a difficult step for him to take. Bygone memories were rushing through his brain, he hardly heard the words that were being read; but when Cherry came to a pause, he lifted his head and made a movement to rise.

Bonnie checked him in a loud whisper.

"We says 'Our Father' now!"

And boys and girls, with the deeper bass voice of the Colonel, united together, in that wonderful universal prayer.

Then they rose from their knees, and the Colonel sent them away.

Cherry was taken to task by the boys in the garden.

"What did you read such a long chapter for?"

"You liked the sound of your own voice, I s'pose!"

"Don't you do it again!"

"And if you're going to be a prig say so, for we will knock it out of you!"

"I'm not a prig!" said Cherry warmly. "Father told me to read. I didn't want to!"

"And she did it bu'fully," said warm-hearted Bonnie. "And dear God will be sorry if you think He wrote His chapters too long!"

Bonnie was always too much for the boys when she turned against them. They turned and fled, with broad grins on their faces; and the little girls went into the orchard to play with the goats.

CHAPTER XIII

A Day of Misfortunes

IT was Sunday morning, and a lovely September day. "I don't like Sundays," announced Phil at the breakfast-table. "Everybody goes to sleep here, and the animals are all shut up. Even Sawdust lies down in the best parlour, with Mr. Watkins smoking. There's nothing to do, and we have to wear our best clothes. It is rot, tommy-rot!"

"But don't you go to church?" asked Cherry.

"No," said Stacy; "it's a mile away, and we felt groggy on our legs the first Sunday we came. Last Sunday was wet. I think we might go to-day. It would be something to do."

"Father will come, perhaps," said Cherry. "He is so much better here; he walks everywhere!"

"Of course he won't come. Don't you ask him. Tell him we're going by ourselves."

But Cherry was out of hearing. She was no longer afraid of going to her father.

"May we go to church this morning?" she asked.

"To church? Oh yes, I suppose so, if you like it," said the Colonel carelessly.

"Won't you come with us, father?"

"No, no; don't worry me."

"I suppose," said Cherry timidly, "we shall know the way. The boys say it is a mile away."

"You must get your maid to go with you. What is her name?"

"Nettie. But father, the boys won't walk out with Nettie. They couldn't, because they are boys. They call her a nursemaid!"

"The boys will do as I wish," the Colonel said, in his dangerously quiet tone.

Cherry stood her ground, though she felt uncomfortable.

"Nettie is going to chapel with Mrs. Watkins this afternoon; she doesn't come to church."

"I really cannot be worried with your churchgoing," said Colonel St. Leger irritably.

Bonnie, who had followed Cherry in, now put in her word.

"Father dear, do let me walk with you just once to church."

The Colonel said nothing for a minute; then he surprised Cherry by saying—

"Just this once I will go with you. Tell the boys to be ready to start at half-past ten. I conclude the service begins at eleven."

The little girls went back to the boys, delighted with the success of their mission, but Stacy did not look well pleased.

"Father was always an easy-going chap at home; he

is getting like Hastings. He will be teaching us lessons next. I like him best when he is lying down smoking."

"I like him always," said Bonnie indignantly, "and he isn't a chap. That's a schoolboy—Father is a man!"

"Go on, you little duffer! You'll have to step out if you walk with father. Soldiers always walk in step, and he'll be in an awful rage if you don't. Your fat duck's legs will give way long before we get there!"

Stacy was rather out of temper. He had been looking forward to the walk to church, thinking that he would be leader. Neither he nor Phil were quite at ease in their father's society. He still seemed almost a stranger to them.

When they started for church, the two boys went on together; the little girls walked by their father's side, and Bonnie startled him by her breathless, spasmodic strides.

"Do you always walk like that?" he asked, looking at her curiously.

"She is trying to step like you," explained Cherry. "The boys told her she would have to."

Bonnie's mind was quickly eased on this point, and she trotted along for the rest of the way quite happily. It was a tiny village church they came to, and not a large congregation. Colonel St. Leger wondered at himself when he found himself packed into a pew with his boys and girls; but with Bonnie's soft little hand always stealing into his, he resigned himself to his fate, and the service soothed and interested him.

When he returned he shut himself up into his room, and told the children not to disturb him. And after this, he never missed going to church with them. The

Vicar called on him, and he discovered that he was a former schoolfellow of his, and as the Vicar was a keen fisherman, they had much in common.

Those days were very happy ones to the children. Cherry, as well as the others, ran wild for the time; but occasionally she would have severe pricks of conscience, and would sit indoors with Nettie, helping to darn the boys' stockings and sew buttons on their clothes. One day stood out, as some days do—a day full of misfortune—and they remembered it for long afterwards.

It began well, for it was a lovely day, and they were allowed to take their lunch out in baskets to the top of a hill near. Nettie did not accompany them, for it was washing-day at the farm, and she had promised Mrs. Watkins to lend her a hand.

It was a bright sunny morning, and the children were in highest spirits. They meant to gather blackberries for puddings again; and the boys were hoping they would find some nuts. It was this hope that led them, after they had eaten their lunch, to descend the hill, and make their way towards some woods in the distance. Sawdust was with them, enjoying himself immensely. He did not care for solitary runs, but the society of children was always to his taste, and he bounded here and there, often nearly knocking Bonnie down in his wild excitement. The little girls were soon hard at work filling their baskets with ripe blackberries, which grew along a thick hedge at the entrance of a wood. The boys joined them for a time, then got tired, and scrambled into the wood. Stacy and Sawdust pushed their way on, leaving Phil trying to reach

some nuts just above his head. The wood seemed to stretch away for miles, and the green mossy paths tempted Stacy farther and farther away. Soon, to his delight, Sawdust put up two pheasants which had been walking under the long bracken in front of them. Stacy knew nothing of game covers. He had been brought up in a town, and considered that in the country all woods and plantations were free to everyone. Sawdust was wiser. He looked with a longing eye at the pheasants, but he did not chase them; and as numbers more flew away on the approach of his blundering body, he looked up at Stacy as much as to say—

"You see I cannot help it. I am doing my best not to frighten them, and they will fuss off!"

"Hi, Phil! Come on!" shouted Stacy; "come and see these birds!"

Phil was out of hearing. Stacy tore along; the whirr of wings on both sides of him, the plaintive cry of a woodcock as he rose in the air, the flight of dozens of birds in front of him, exhilarated and enchanted him. Sawdust began to get uncomfortable. At last he slipped behind and followed Stacy in the rear. He made up his mind that he would not be responsible for this folly. He remembered a former playmate being shot for chasing sheep. Surely pheasant chasing might lead to a similar result!

And then suddenly Stacy's run came to an end. He turned a corner, heard angry voices, and came upon two gamekeepers, and a very excited little man in brown velveteen coat and shabby gaiters, with a gun slung across his shoulders.

They looked in astonishment at him, and the little man darted forward and laid hold of him by the coat-collar, exclaiming with an angry oath—

"You young scoundrel! you vagabond! How dare you rout my covers, in such a fashion! Blake! Forrest! give me a stick! I'll give him the soundest thrashing I've ever given any one! You fools! to think that a stray dog should send such hundreds away! Why, confound it all, there is a dog, a monster! Seize him, Blake! You coward! afraid to touch him! Take hold of this rascal, and I'll settle the dog. I'll put some shot through him, if there's no other way!" He accompanied each sentence with such a violent shake to poor Stacy, that the boy began to feel quite dazed and stupid. When one of the keepers took him, and the little gentleman with purple face and glaring eyes advanced towards Sawdust, Stacy found his voice.

"If you don't look out he'll bite you. Sawdust, lie down sir—be quiet! Is this gentleman off his head?"

This question, put to the keeper, did not mend matters.

"Hold yer tongue, sir! 'Tis his lordship. You must be off yours, to rush through his best cover in such a fashion! And he has a shooting party on to-morrow, and this was the prime bit of all!"

This was poured out in an undertone, but Lord Danvers was too angry to heed it. He and the other keeper managed to tie a piece of cord to Sawdust's collar, and though the dog showed great forbearance, and only gave vent to a low growl when his head was touched, the operation was not a pleasant one. The keeper wiped his forehead with his handkerchief, and muttered—

"The little man darted forward and laid hold of him by the coat-collar."

"His lordship do expec' one to risk one's life all in a minute! If he wasn't such a big brute, I'd not object; but there, 'tis over now!"

"Now, Forrest, bring that scamp along. I'll lock him up and commit him to gaol! I'll shoot his dog! He shall be sent to a reformatory! He has done more damage than a hundred pounds will pay for!"

It was in vain for Stacy to apologise and explain. He was hurried along, and finally lodged in an empty stable. Sawdust was tied up with him, and the keeper, locking and bolting the door on the outside, went away and left him in darkness.

Stacy was more indignant than frightened.

"Whatever kind of a lord he is, he has a beastly temper; and I'm not going to spend the night here, whatever he may think!"

He jumped up and began examining his prison. His quick eyes soon discerned a trap-door in the roof, and in a very short time, clambering up to it, he opened it and found himself in a low, dusty loft.

The windows were small, but he managed to open one and put his head out. He saw a yard, and a waggon of hay which, by good fortune, was standing directly under his window. No one seemed to be about. The carter was gossiping with two or three girls inside the doorway of a small cottage adjoining the yard.

"I can squeeze myself through and jump on to the hay!" was Stacy's instant thought.

Then he heard Sawdust whine.

"Poor Sawdust! I must unlock the door and loose him when I am out; he could never get up into the loft!"

Very cautiously he got out of the window. It was not a very long drop, and he accomplished it in safety. The horse started, it is true, but the carter did not notice him; and Stacy crept up to the stable door. Alas! It was locked, and the key had been taken away. For a minute he hesitated, then he saw, to his horror, the carter coming out, and away he ran—through the yard, down a lane, across a field, into the high road. When there, he paused. He was not sure of his way. He dared not go back into the woods, for he heard voices and reports of guns occasionally. He finally made up his mind to go straight home, trusting that his sisters would be returning there with Phil; and after inquiring the exact road from a man who was passing, he set off as fast as he could, wondering to whom he had better confide his story, and if it would be necessary to tell his father. As it happened, Colonel St. Leger was the first person he met when he came to the farm.

"You are late; where are the girls?"

"Aren't they home with Phil?"

"No, Mr. Watkins has just been to me. Your tea is waiting."

The Colonel looked rather sternly at his eldest son. Stacy had lost his cap, his collar was half off, and he presented a very dishevelled spectacle.

"Perhaps," said his father, in his very quiet tone, "you will kindly tell me what you have been doing. Come into my room."

Stacy followed, and stood up with frank eyes and red cheeks to tell his tale.

Colonel St. Leger listened in perfect silence. Stacy concluded with—

"It honestly wasn't mischief, father. I don't understand now why disturbing a few pheasants need have put the old gentleman in such a beastly wax! And I don't know what Mr. Watkins will say about Sawdust, because they may shoot or poison him!"

In a few terse words the Colonel made Stacy aware of the iniquity of his offence, and then sitting down to his table, he wrote a note to Lord Danvers, and sent off Goff immediately with it.

"You want your tutor to look after you," he said. "Now you had better go and find the others and bring them home."

Stacy left the room, and the Colonel, with a puckered brow, took up his newspaper. He had only been congratulating himself that afternoon upon the easy time he was having. He saw very little more of his children than he did at home; and had so far seen little to complain of in their behaviour. This scrape of Stacy's annoyed him extremely; and he began to wonder if the other three children had transgressed in the same way.

Voices outside, and a horrified scream from Mrs. Watkins, made him open his door hastily. Stacy appeared, leading Phil by the hand. Phil's right wrist was bound with a bloodstained handkerchief; blood was dripping from it, and the boy's face was as white as death.

"He has been shot, father, and he can't stop the bleeding!"

The Colonel sat down heavily on a chair. He seemed for a moment unable to act. Then he turned to Mrs. Watkins sternly—

"Will you stop screaming so, and fetch a doctor if you can't attend to it yourself!"

"Mercy, sir! the doctor lives six miles away, and John be at the town sellin' a calf, and the men be still out in the fields."

"You must have a lad in the yard. Tell him to go!"

"There be only silly Jim; he will be gone all night on such an errand. But we have the pony in; Jim could harness it, if you liked to take the young gentleman in the pony cart. 'Twould be quicker. Bleedin' is so dangersome, 'tis best to have it seen to!"

"Have the pony harnessed and brought round immediately," said the Colonel. "Now Phil, come here; let me try my hand at bandaging."

"I feel so sick and giddy; do you think I'm bleeding to death?" inquired Phil anxiously, as he held out his arm bravely towards his father.

"Pooh, nonsense! You have most likely a few small pellets in your wrist. There; I thought so! Be a man, and bear it. You're a bad hand at bandaging!"

Colonel St. Leger had risen to the occasion. He bandaged the hurt wrist freshly with one of his own white handerchiefs. He poured out a glass of wine, and made Phil drink it, and then hurried him out into the yard.

When he was in the cart, and Phil by his side, he turned to Stacy.

"I suppose you found your sisters?"

"No," said Stacy miserably; "I don't know where they are—Phil couldn't find them where we left them. I met Phil and brought him back."

"Look for them at once, and don't come home till you have found them," were the Colonel's last words as he drove out of the yard.

Stacy was very tired; he sat down on an old wheelbarrow, and felt almost inclined to cry. Why was everything going wrong? He was hungry, and wanted his tea; he almost wished he were in Phil's place!

Mrs. Watkins came out to condole with him.

"I'll fetch you a piece of bread and butter, and then you bring them back as fast as you can. You young gentlemen didn't ought to have left them little maids all alone. I'd come along the road a bit with you myself, but I have my butter all to do for to-morrow's market."

Stacy soon trudged away, bread and butter in hand. It was getting dusk, and he felt more angry with his sisters than anxious about them.

When Colonel St. Leger returned with Phil it was eight o'clock, quite dark, and neither Stacy or the little girls had returned.

Phil was sent to bed. His wound was a painful one, though not dangerous, and he was shaken and faint with loss of blood. He told his father how it had happened. He was walking through a thick part of the wood, when he heard voices, and was making his way towards them, when a brace of partridges rose at his feet; he heard a sharp report close to him, and received some of the discharge in his wrist.

"I was so frightened that I ran away as hard as I could. I was afraid they would shoot me again! I came out just where we had left Cherry and Bonnie, but they weren't there, though they had left one of the baskets, and then my arm began to bleed awfully, and I tried to tie my handkerchief round, and then soon after I met Stacy."

"It seems," said the Colonel drily, "that you boys

invariably lose your sisters, and leave them to find their way home by themselves. You are not to be trusted."

When the Colonel found the other children had not returned, he was really anxious. He was just going out again, when Goff appeared with Sawdust. He had had great trouble to get him liberated, but tired as he was with his long walk, he at once volunteered to accompany the Colonel in his search. The two set off, and Mr. Watkins, who had just come home, joined them with a lantern.

Stacy's scrape had vexed the Colonel; Phil's had alarmed him; but the loss of the little girls filled him with anxiety and distress. Bonnie was the apple of his eye, Cherry had entwined herself round his heart by her strong likeness to her mother, and, as he strode along, he put up a prayer that they might be given back to him again, and that no evil might have befallen them.

They had walked about a mile along the road that the children had taken that morning, when suddenly they heard a shout. It was Stacy. When he came up to them, and saw who they were, he looked intensely relieved.

"I've found them, father, but I can't get to them."

"Where are they?"

"Stuck among some reeds in a boat, the other side of the river. This way!"

He led the little party across a field to the river's edge.

There, sure enough, under a steep bank of blackberry bushes and branches, was a boat, with two little forlorn creatures in it.

"I've gone in twice," said Stacy; "but the water twirls me round so, and I'm not a dab at swimming;

I was nearly drowned, and then I thought I'd better not be, so I was coming for help!"

Goff threw off his coat and boots in a minute. There was a strong current running. It was a wonder that the boat had not been swept along further, but it had become tightly wedged in the roots of an old willow, and Cherry, with wonderful forethought, had tied her sash round one of the branches that overhung the water, and was grasping the ends of it tightly in her two little hands.

It did not take Goff long to bring the boat ashore. The little girls were stiff with cold and exposure. Cherry had given Bonnie her jacket in addition to her own, so she was in the worse plight of the two. Colonel St. Leger took Bonnie in his arms, and carried her home; Mr. Watkins did the same to Cherry, and Goff led the way with the lantern. He and Stacy were both soaked through, and when they reached the farm Mrs. Watkins and Nettie had their hands full. The children were put to bed at once, and given hot basins of bread and milk. Colonel St. Leger visited them all before he retired to rest, and was relieved to see that they were all —even Phil—sleeping quietly and peacefully.

Then he came back to his room, and said to Goff—

"We must return home at once. I will take the responsibility of the children no longer."

CHAPTER XIV

Home Again

THE children suffered very little from the effects of that unfortunate day. Phil's wrist healed rapidly, and he became rather proud of showing it to various lads about the farm.

"Did it hurt? Of course it did—just as much as if I had been shot in battle. There's many a chap invalided home with a wounded arm like mine. And I'd like to give a piece of my mind to the brutes who did it. I believe I could get them fined or imprisoned for it. If I only knew the party, I would march up a couple of policemen to them and give them in custody!"

Cherry was the one who was laid up for a couple of days with a very heavy cold. Bonnie did not seem much the worse. She gave her father a long account of herself and Cherry after the boys had left them.

"We picked our baskets full, father dear, and then we sat down. We was so tired that we had to eat a good many, and we waited ever so long till we were sure it was tea-time, and then Cherry said we must get home; so we tried to, but the fields had got mixed, and

some cows ran at us, and then we found a lovely little boat by the river. We knew it must be your river, father dear, so we thinked if we got in, and poked the big stick through the water, it would bring us home; but Cherry couldn't hold it proper, and it knocked her on the chin, and tumbled in the water, but the boat went just as fast without it. And we should have come home bu'fully, father dear, if that horrid old tree hadn't stopped us. We was going dreadfully fast, only when the tree catched us we bobbed about and turned round and round, and so Cherry tied her sash on, and kept us steady, and then it did get fearfully dark, and we called! and called! And then we called dear God to take care of us. He never goes far away, does He? And then it got cold, and we kept pretending we was peoples in the Bible: Cherry made it up lovely. First we was Noah in his ark, and then we was Moses in his basket, and then we was the disciples when Jesus wasn't with them. But it got worse and worse, and then we both cried, and then we shouted, and screamed, and then Stacy screamed back. We was so pleased, and then, father dear, you carried me all the way home, and I loves you!"

Colonel St. Leger found he could not go home so easily as he imagined; for the house was still in the hands of the painters and whitewashers. Mr. Hastings had only had a very slight attack, and had just been moved to the seaside, where he was going to stay for three weeks, before he returned to his little charges.

The Colonel chafed a good deal under these arrangements; but the children were on their best behaviour again, and he found that by taking Stacy out fishing

with him, one adventurous spirit was kept quiet, and the others were happy enough in the vicinity of the farm.

It was in this way that father and son drew closer together. Stacy's tone in speaking of his father changed. It was more respectful; he began to discover that the Colonel was not so indifferent to his sons as he seemed, that he had ideas about their future prospects, which were rather interesting.

"In fact," Stacy exclaimed at one schoolroom tea, "I think it is a jolly thing to have a father, and I'm jolly glad he took us away from Dr. Burton. You see a doctor isn't much good to any one unless they're sick, and we shall never be that again I hope. He can't know the world like father does, or have as much sense about boys and men as father has. I think we've done very well for ourselves."

"We haven't done anything," said Cherry. "Father has done it all."

Shortly after this Cherry was reading the fifteenth chapter of St. John's Gospel at prayers.

And after they were over she stole up to her bedroom, and got out her own little Bible. Her eyes were shining with excitement. She had found a chapter after her own heart. True, it was grapes and not cherries, that were mentioned; but fruit-bearing was the subject, and Cherry repeated over and over to herself the verse—

"He that abideth in Me, and I in him, the same bringeth forth much fruit, for without Me ye can do nothing!"

She turned this over and over in her mind, and longed to talk to some one about it. At last she thought of

writing to Miss Arnold, and after spending a whole afternoon over it, this production was sent:—

"My dear Miss Arnold,—I have read a verse to-day. Please will you write and tell me about it. It is in St. John, chapter xv., and the verse is the fifth. It is all about fruit, and this verse says 'bringeth forth much fruit.' What does it mean, 'Abide in Me?' It seems to tell the way to bear fruit, but I cannot understand it. Please write and tell me. I want to bear much fruit. I am trying hard when I don't forget. And is darning the boys' stockings, instead of going out to play, a kind of fruit? I should like to see you again.

"Your loving

"Cherry."

She received an answer soon, and to her delight it was written so clearly that she could decipher it herself.

"My dear little Friend,—Don't make me into a parson. I cannot expound your verse, but my old governess is a little saint, and when I can pluck up courage I will ask her about it. It sounds rather awe-inspiring. Good works are comparatively easy; this would not be. Perhaps I shall discover that I am still a cumberer, and shall be till the end of the chapter, in spite of all my efforts in the contrary direction! You will not understand a word of this. But we will have a good talk together when you come home. I am going to bring my old governess back with me, and give her a good time. Goodbye.

"Your loving friend,

"Blanche Arnold."

Cherry puzzled over this. She did not consider it at all satisfactory, and ventured to ask her father very shyly one day—

"Father, what does 'abide' mean?"

"To stay, or live," replied the Colonel.

"Can you live in a person?"

"Hardly. In a house, you mean. An abode is a dwelling place."

Cherry sighed, and asked no more questions. She studied her verse very often. And the last part of it she understood. She added a clause in her morning and evening prayers—

"And oh, God, the Bible says I can't do nothing without Jesus to help me. Do please let Him help me to bear fruit, *much* fruit like the Bible says. Show me how to do it, for Jesus Christ's sake. Amen."

One afternoon the Colonel was sitting in the orchard smoking his pipe. Bonnie was busy raking some fallen apples together; Cherry was lying full length on the grass, deep in an old-fashioned story-book that Mrs. Watkins had given her.

The boys were out in the farmyard with Mr. Watkins; their shrill voices made themselves heard occasionally. Colonel St. Leger was feeling very comfortable. He was meditating in a lazy fashion over his sojourn at the farm, and congratulating himself upon his improved health and spirits. Suddenly the sound of wheels startled him, and looking up, he saw a carriage drive up to the farm.

Bonnie saw it too, and was at once interested.

"A fat lady is getting out," she announced. "Do you think it is somebody come to see us, father dear?"

"Let us hope not," muttered the Colonel.

It was a vain hope. A few minutes later a rustling dress and a well-known voice sounded in his ear—

"My dear Eustace, what an out-of-the-way place to stay in! I thought I should never discover you!"

It was Mrs. Crawford. The Colonel rose and gave her a seat.

"It was a pity you did not let me know you were in this neighbourhood," he said quietly; "then I might have directed you rightly."

"I am staying with Lady Summers, about seven miles off. You remember her, do you not? She would be charmed to renew her acquaintance with you. She has kindly lent me her carriage, or I could not have come so far. Well, how are you, Eustace? and when are you going home?"

"As soon as the painters will allow us," said the Colonel shortly.

Mrs. Crawford's gaze fell on the two little girls.

"Poor little motherless creatures!" she said. "They are growing so fast; you will need some woman's influence over them."

The Colonel frowned. His cousin laid her hand affectionately on his arm.

"Now, my dear Eustace, be advised by me; do not shut yourself away from society any longer. I have you so upon my mind, that I cannot rest at night sometimes for thinking of you. It is not natural or right for a man in your circumstances to be alone. I am sure your dear wife would be the first one to say that it is necessary for your children's welfare that you should marry again. Now, don't be angry with me. I have just thought of the very person to suit you, and I could

not rest till I had come over and told you. What do you say to Blanche Arnold? I hear she has taken a violent fancy to the little girls. You knew her when she was a child; she has a nice income of her own, and lately has developed several admirable qualities. She would make a capital mother to your children."

"Cherry!" said the Colonel very quietly; "come here." Cherry had been standing under an apple-tree with Bonnie, listening to this conversation with great bewilderment. "Tell your Cousin Anna what I told you a short while ago. She may understand it from your lips, for she certainly does not from mine. Tell her who is going to take your dear mother's place, and assure her that our plans for the future are already made."

Cherry rested her little hand on her father's knee, and looked up at Mrs. Crawford rather shyly.

"Father says that I am to be like mother, and do what she did. And"—with a little flush of enthusiasm which swallowed up her shyness—"I mean to. I am beginning as fast as I can, and I shall look after the boys and Bonnie, and take care of the house, and sit at the other end of the table, as I do here when father has his lunch with us. I shall try and grow up exactly like mother."

"And tell your cousin we mean to have no other mistress over us," put in the Colonel, in his dry tone.

"Really, Eustace," said Mrs. Crawford impatiently, "I shall begin to think you have a screw loose if you talk to your children like this! I never heard such nonsense! You are stuffing that child's head with unwholesome notions. She is too small to think of responsibility in any shape or form. How is your tutor? When is he coming back to his duty again?"

The dangerous topic was dropped. Mrs. Crawford did not allude to it again, but the Colonel drew a breath of relief when her visit was over.

"What did Cousin Anna mean about Miss Arnold?" Cherry asked her father, with curiosity in her tone.

"We won't think of it," he replied.

"But," said Bonnie breathlessly, "Cousin Anna said she would make herself a mother to us! How could she? She wasn't borned our mother!"

Bonnie's ideas of relationship were always peculiar. Her father smiled.

"No, she is a nice friend to my little girls; but she will never be anything else."

And then the boys came up and demanded the girls' services at a game of cricket.

At last the day came for their return home. The children were both glad and sorry to go; the weather was becoming unsettled, and rain at the farm was not enjoyable. The boys felt parting most of all with Sawdust. They hung round his neck, and smothered him with caresses.

"I wish you would give him to us, Mr. Watkins," said Stacy. "We're teaching him wonderful tricks, and he will forget them all if we go."

"Ye had better bide a bit longer then," suggested the farmer.

But they shook their heads.

"We want to see how our rabbits and guinea-pigs are getting on, and whether A.B.C. is keeping the apples for us as he promised, and old Hastings will be coming back, and he isn't half a bad fellow you know!"

They were welcomed back with great delight by Mrs. Tipkins.

"The house have been like death, and the workmen so aggravatin' that it is high time they should see the Colonel's face. How well you look, Master Stacy! quite grown! And Master Phil with such a colour! And as to you, Miss Bonnie, I never thought as how you could throw off your illness so quickly! Miss Cherry and we quite thought you were marked for death!"

Abercrombie shook his head at them as they danced round him.

"We've had rare quiet sin' ye left us—a verra peaceable time; an' though I'll not say I be grieved to bid ye welcome home, the wee flowers an' the plants are the better for bein' unplucked an' ne'er trodden doon!"

"Now, A.B.C., where are the apples?"

"And aren't the grapes ripe yet? You're a pretty gardener!"

"And have you watered my little tree, please?"

"Where is my dear darling little red daisies? They're all gone! Oh, A.B.C., you've cutted them off!"

Bonnie's wail was the only one that provoked a reply.

"Deed naethin' o' the sort, Missy! The wee daisies be gone the way o' most men. They've lived their lives, and de'ed in their ain guid time!"

"But they needn't have died," argued Bonnie, with tearful eyes; "you might have made them live till I came home!"

"Life an' death be in the han's o' th' Almighty," said Abercrombie gravely.

"Dear God planted them all Himself," went on Bonnie. "You said He did; I'm sure He'd like them to stay alive."

It was a special patch of grass round an old elm which

was Bonnie's great delight. Abercrombie left the grass uncut to please her. She called it "Dear God's little garden."

Cherry tried to explain to her that the daisies were not really dead—that they would come up the following spring; and with this comfort Bonnie dried her tears. A few days later Mr. Hastings arrived. He looked rather gaunt and pale after his recent illness. The Colonel shook hands warmly with him, and called him into his room.

"I am really deeply grateful to you for the way you nursed my boys," he said. "I am not sorry to hand them over to your charge again. Their continual flow of spirits is rather fatiguing; but I am stronger than I was, and don't wish to shirk every bit of responsibility. I shall be glad to have a chat with you from time to time. And——"

The Colonel paused, then added rather awkwardly: "The children have come into my room—since we have been away you know—for morning prayers—and I should like them to continue it."

Mr. Hastings was surprised, but took care not to show it.

"Certainly. They shall do so still, sir."

So Cherry still read morning prayers, and her father would sit listening to her soft childish voice, shading his eyes with his hand. He loved to catch the resemblance in her tones to those of her mother, and would often bring a pleased flush to her cheeks by saying—

"You are getting very like your mother, little woman!"

The Vicarage children, of course, were delighted to welcome them back, and Cherry beheld with delight

some pinafores that she had helped to hem, on the baby and the little girls. She asked Ruth if she had seen Miss Arnold.

"She's just come home, and she brought mother some lovely grapes, and some little brown birds for father. Don't you like her, Cherry? Father and I think her the goodest person in the world! She is so kind."

"Of course I like her," said Cherry, a little grandly; "because she is my friend. I knew her before you did."

Ruth was inclined to argue this out, but Cherry quenched her.

"I don't mind her coming to see you and Ruth, but she's *my* friend, and I haven't got another in the whole world. She's my only one."

CHAPTER XV

How to have Fruit

"WELL, Cherry, how has the world been treating you?"

Miss Arnold had arrived in her pony carriage, and had carried off Cherry for a drive.

Cherry looked up with a bright smile.

"You do say funny things, Miss Arnold."

"Do I? Well, I am going to be serious. I have brought you out because I want to have a long talk with you. I have been learning lessons since I saw you last."

"Have you been going to school?" asked Cherry, with a puzzled face.

"No, I have been learning them by the side of a sick-bed."

"Real lessons out of books like we do?"

"Lessons, out of one Book. I hope they are real. I mean them to be."

Cherry did not speak. Grown-up people puzzled her very much sometimes, Miss Arnold especially. There was a soft tone in her voice now, and her face seemed much brighter than it used to be.

"Do you remember the verse you sent me, little woman?"

"Oh yes."

"I thought that was the last stage of fruit-bearing. Good works—'doing good' as you call it—was the first stage; then the fruits of the Spirit—'being good,' shall we call it?—was the second stage; and this last verse of yours was the final stage. But I found I was altogether wrong. It is the first stage, and the most important one; the others follow naturally. Do you understand me?"

"I don't think I do," said Cherry humbly.

Miss Arnold gave a little sigh.

"I really am not cut out for children," she said; "I can't be simple enough—and yet I want to be, Cherry, so much! I want to help you, little one, as I have been helped myself. Now listen! You and I have been cumberers—at least I have, all my life—and we want to turn over a new leaf, and bear fruit, don't we?"

"Yes," assented Cherry earnestly.

"The first thing we have got to do is to go straight to our Master, who has been watching over us so patiently and sorrowfully, and tell Him we want to be different."

"I've told God that every day," said Cherry, with a little solemn nod.

"Then we have to open our heart's door and let our Saviour come in and abide with us. He wants to live with us every day, Cherry. Inside us, so that He can take care of our hearts, and keep them clean, and make us good. We have to let Him in, and He will do the rest. And then He will help us to bear fruit. The fruit comes from Him."

Miss Arnold's face softened, and glowed as she spoke. Cherry looked at her wonderingly.

"Mr. Hastings said we must be good before we could do good," she said thoughtfully.

"Mr. Hastings was right, but you see we can't be good or do good, unless our Master is inside us making us good."

Cherry pondered over this.

"And now," said Miss Arnold, with a sudden change of tone, "that is my little sermon, Cherry—the lesson I am trying to learn. Now tell me all you have been doing since you have been away."

Cherry's tongue went very fast. She was surprised when the drive came to an end, and they arrived at Miss Arnold's house.

She took her straight to her pretty morning room, where, on a couch in the window, lay one of the sweetest looking old ladies that Cherry had ever seen.

She was very small and thin, and wore a grey wrapper, with a white shawl round her shoulders. A close white cap was on her head, but her blue eyes and her happy smile fascinated Cherry.

"This is my little teacher," said Miss Arnold, laying her hand on Cherry's shoulder.

"A very small one," said the old lady brightly.

"But I couldn't be a teacher," said Cherry perplexedly.

Miss Arnold laughed. "She is my little fellow-cumberer then, Miss Mordaunt. I am going to see if luncheon is ready, so will leave you two together."

"I have heard all about you," said Miss Mordaunt, holding out her hand to Cherry, and drawing her near to her; "and I have wanted very much to see you.

You are a little cherry-tree, and you want to be sure that your cherries are good."

"Yes," said Cherry shyly. "A clergyman told me that once, and I've never forgot it."

"Will you tell me about your brothers and sisters?"

"Stacy and Phil are the boys," said Cherry readily. "They're always together, and Bonnie and me. Bonnie is little, and funny, and good. I wish you could see her. Everybody likes her. She is so soft and fat."

"She sounds delightful," said Miss Mordaunt smiling. "And what about the boys?"

"Oh, Phil is very clever, he is always making things; and Stacy is big and strong, and tells you to do things—and you have to, you know! And would you like to hear about father?"

Cherry was fast losing her shyness. Miss Mordaunt assented, and she spoke in eager enthusiasm.

"We never knew him till last spring, when he came home from India. I was frightened of him, but Bonnie wasn't. And he was so quiet and grave; but he has lovely eyes, and he smiles right inside you. And now we all love him. He is ill, and he likes to be quiet, and he doesn't tell funny stories like Dr. Burton used to do, but he talks to us just as if we were grown-up people, and that's delicious! And I am going to grow up and make him comfortable, and stay with him for ever and ever. And Goff tells us stories about father, how brave he was in India when he had to fight; and Goff says there's no one living that comes up to him—no one!"

Cherry paused for breath, but soon continued in the same strain; and when Miss Arnold came back, she found the two were the greatest friends.

When Cherry returned home that day she thought over Miss Arnold's words. She got her Bible out, and pondered over the verse again; then wondered if Bonnie, who seemed so wise sometimes in unseen things, could help her.

"Bonnie, come here, I want to talk to you."

Bonnie had been quietly dipping Dinah's cotton feet into the schoolroom inkpot. She came across at once to Cherry, who was sitting by the window, with Dinah in her arms, and Dinah's feet dripped over her white pinafore as she walked.

"Oh, Bonnie, what have you been doing? Look at your fingers! And your pinafore!"

"It's blacking," said Bonnie complacently. "Dinah had lost her shoes, so I've maded her black feet!

"But Nettie will be so angry."

"She'll send my pinny to be washed."

Nothing would disturb Bonnie. She was in one of her most complacent moods.

She sat down now, and put on one of her most seraphic looks.

"Bonnie, do you know how we can be really good?"

"How?"

"Well, we have to open our hearts to Jesus, and then He comes in, and makes us good."

Bonnie was silent, then she looked up and smiled.

"Is Jesus in your heart, Cherry?"

"I don't know; I want Him to be."

"He will be, if you ask Him, won't He?"

Cherry's face grew bright. She had been puzzling her head as to how she was to open her heart, and what it meant; Bonnie had solved the difficulty in a minute.

It was only to ask Him, and He would come in. But she did not do it then. She waited till she went to bed, and then, after her evening prayer, she remained on her knees with her eyes tight shut, and her lips moving.

Bonnie watched her from her bed curiously.

"Was you telling dear God a secret?" she asked, as Cherry clambered into her bed, and Nettie, taking the candle in her hand, went away.

"I was asking—what I wanted," Cherry replied. She would tell Bonnie nothing more.

Autumn came and passed, and the winter drew near. The children were consequently more confined to the house. Mr. Hastings kept them well employed, but now and then Colonel St. Leger would send Goff upstairs with a message that he must have more quiet. It was hard work to curb their spirits sometimes, and Bonnie more than once crept into her father's room with the audacious request—

"Please, dear father, could you put some wool in your ears, and let us have one little romp for five minutes?"

In November, the boys were delighted to have Angus Allan for a schoolfellow. It was an arrangement partly made, or suggested, by Miss Arnold. He was a quick scholar, and seemed to enjoy his books, which was far from the case with Stacy and Phil.

"You see," he said, one wet half-holiday, as he was helping the others to make toffee over the schoolroom fire, "I want to go to Oxford when I grow up. That is where father went, and, if I can get a scholarship, I may be able to manage it!"

"What will you do after that?" said Stacy, as he

turned from his occupation of watching the toffee on the fire, and looked at Angus rather curiously.

"I shall be a clergyman then, and I shall have Grace to come and keep house for me. She knows how to make a fellow comfortable!"

"You mustn't take Grace away," said Cherry hastily; "because what would everybody else do without her?"

"I don't think I should like Cherry to keep house for me," said Stacy. "She's getting rather priggish; why, she actually wouldn't help us, when we were hiding A.B.C.'s wheelbarrow yesterday. She said it wouldn't be kind! I hate 'kind' people!"

"All right, Cherry; the next time he wants a button sown on, or bags for his marbles made, mind you don't do it. Don't be kind to him!"

Angus nodded good-naturedly to Cherry, who was looking rather distressed at her brother's words.

"I don't want to be a prig," she said.

"What's a prig?" demanded Bonnie, with her mouth full of some of the sticky compound they were making.

"It's a person that sets themselves up to be better than their neighbours! A creature that is too good to live!" said Phil.

Bonnie tried to understand.

"We ought to be worse than our neighbours, I s'pose. How good mustn't you be? I thought dear God wants us to be good."

"Oh shut up, Bonnie! You're too stupid for words!"

"I shouldn't like to be a clergyman," said Phil thoughtfully, "for they have such a dull time of it; and they always stick in a little village and sit half the day making up sermons. It's all very well for old men! I

mean to go abroad and travel where no one has ever been before, and see all kinds of wonderful horrible things!"

"But," argued Angus, "all clergymen don't stick in villages. I shall go up to London. It's the grandest profession out." Here he threw his head back with enthusiasm. "It's trying to get at the best part of people, and leading them to think the best, and live for the best! And not a day of your life is wasted!"

"A soldier's life for me!" said Stacy. "That's a grand life if you like, just living and dying for others! A clergyman couldn't have as grand a death as a soldier's, unless he was burnt for his religion like some chaps were!"

"Oh I wish, I wish!" said Cherry, with glowing cheeks, "that girls could be something! I think I should like to be a clergyman!"

The boys laughed. Stacy said, with his grand air—

"If you stop at home and mend men's clothes, and do what they want you to do, that's good enough for any girl!"

"You might be a clergyman's wife," said Angus. "P'r'aps I'll ask you to be mine—but I think I'd rather have Grace."

"I'm never going to be a wife," said Cherry warmly. "I'm always going to stay with father. I forgot him; I shall take care of him always."

"And what are you going to do, Bonnie?" asked Angus.

Bonnie considered, with a sticky finger in her mouth.

"I think I shall be a woman in a sweet-shop," she said, "or a gardener's boy. P'r'aps that would be best."

"You won't grow up into a boy, you goose!"

"I shall be like Miss Arnold," said Bonnie, with a sudden inspiration; "and I shall ask children to come and play in my garden every day, and my garden shall be all daisies and buttercups and trees—they shan't be gardener's flowers at all. They shall all be dear God's!"

"As if a gardener makes any flower!" said Phil.

"A.B.C. does; he puts them in the ground, and they come up."

"Miss Arnold is awfully jolly," said Angus; "I wish all grown-up people were like her. She gave me a football the other day!"

"Oh, Angus!" exclaimed the boys; "you never told us!"

"Well, I've—I've lost it. I kicked it over into old Jones's garden, and he's such a crabbed old fellow he won't give it to me, and says he hasn't seen it."

Stacy and Phil were greatly interested. They finally left the toffee-making, and went off in a body to the irascible old man's place, to entreat him to restore the lost property.

Cherry began to tidy the room, and Bonnie watched her.

"Cherry, Miss Arnold gives Ruth, and Faith, and Bessie, and all of them such a lot of nice things. She never gives you and me anything; why doesn't she?"

"Because we don't want them so badly," said Cherry. "They're very poor, Bonnie, and their father and mother never buy them anything at all."

"But father doesn't buy us things," said Bonnie.

Cherry made no answer.

Bonnie presently trotted down to her father's room,

and tried to give him the sum and substance of the conversation in the schoolroom. She concluded with—

"And wouldn't you like, dear father, to give us a present one day?"

"I might," said the Colonel quietly.

Bonnie clapped her hands.

"When will you give us it?"

"I think you must wait till Christmas."

And with this answer Bonnie had to be content.

CHAPTER XVI

Blossoms Of Hope

CHRISTMAS came, and a very enjoyable time it was. Miss Arnold gave a children's party, with a large Christmas tree, and everybody seemed to get just the thing they had been wishing for. Colonel St. Leger was actually persuaded to attend this fête, and assisted Miss Arnold to distribute the presents off the tree. He gave his own girls and boys very handsome presents on Christmas Day.

Stacy was made the proud possessor of a little brown pony. Phil had a silver watch and chain. Cherry had a beautiful bound copy of "The Pilgrim's Progress," with coloured pictures, and a little leather writing-case with silver fittings; Bonnie a baby doll almost as big as herself.

The Colonel was better in health, and seemed to be gaining energy and interest in his surroundings. He gave Stacy his first riding lesson, and not only allowed the Vicarage children to come to tea one evening, but invited the Vicar and his wife to dine with him the same

night. Then Mrs. Crawford heard of it, and swept down upon him, and Colonel St. Leger at last gratified her by going to dine with her.

The Christmas holidays passed very pleasantly, and lessons soon began again in earnest. Then came a great event in Cherry's life. Miss Arnold invited her to go up to London with her for a week, and after a consultation between Mr. Hastings and the Colonel Cherry was allowed to go.

It was the week before Easter; the boys were rather envious.

"Why does she always choose you? Why couldn't she ask us?"

"We're going to shop," said Cherry importantly; "boys don't know how to do that."

"Oh, don't we!" cried Phil. "Give me the money, and you'll see how fast I can shop! I hear there is a whole street in London full of mice, and guinea-pigs, and rabbits, and monkeys, and parrots, and every sort of bird—that's where I should go!

"And you can get ices all the year round in London," put in Stacy; "and there's an arcade kind of place where you can get all you want awfully cheap. Angus knows it. You get knives and pocket pistols and fishing-rods for next to nothing—don't you, Angus?"

Angus nodded.

"And the books! You should see the book shops."

"Oh, we shan't go to any of those places," said Cherry. "We are going to get pretty stuff for pinafores and frocks and petticoats!"

"Call that shopping!"

And the boys turned away in disgust.

When Cherry's small trunk was packed, and Miss Arnold's carriage was outside, waiting to take her to the station, she went the round of the house saying good-bye with such impressiveness and solemnity, that Mrs. Tipkins told her she might be going for a year instead of a week.

"We shall only have time to turn ourselves round, and you will be back again, Miss Cherry."

"But a week is a long time," said Cherry; "and London is very, very far away."

Bonnie flung her arms round her neck and nearly choked her.

"I does hope you won't get killed in London, or lost. Father and me thinks it will be dreadful till you come back. But I promise truly to be like one of the best little angels in Heaven. I'll be very, very good! And I'll let Nettie tug my hair, when she gets out the knots, and I won't give one little scream. And oh, Cherry, father and me thinks it would be wunnerful if you sent us a letter by the post, with my name on it!"

The boys gave her a hug too. They had not yet grown ashamed of showing any affection for their sisters.

"And Cherry," said Phil suggestively, "people always bring presents from London. If you should have any tin that Miss Arnold may give you, and don't know what to do with it, and you see a handy tool-box anywhere, it's just what I'm wanting, and I'll let you go halves in it!"

"Do you think she'd have enough for a tool-box!" said Stacy scornfully. "But I tell you what, Cherry; keep your eyes on the penny men in the streets—

Angus says there are awfully funny things they sell, and bring us back a few, as specimens, if you can."

Mr. Hastings slipped two shillings into her hand.

"Spend it on yourself, and not on the boys," he said, smiling; "and keep your eyes and ears open, and come back and tell us all you have seen and heard."

"You ought to tell her to improve her mind," said Stacy saucily; "and come back stored with London wisdom and knowledge."

Cherry's goodbye to her father was left till the last. He stooped and kissed her gravely.

"We shall miss you, little woman," he said, "especially at prayers in the morning; but I am glad you are going to have such a treat. You are getting to be nearly as useful to me as Goff is!"

That was the highest praise he could offer her, and when he slipped a gold sovereign into her hand and told her to spend it as she liked, Cherry took it with an awe-struck face, and drove away with mingled feelings of excitement, nervousness, and delight. She was very silent during the journey, and her little soul was filled with awe, when she arrived in London and saw the crowds and shops. Miss Arnold was staying with an old cousin of hers in a quiet London square; but she was out all day in a hired brougham, taking Cherry from shop to shop, and spending her money fast and freely.

"I have such a lot of Easter presents to get, Cherry, and you must help me choose some for the Vicarage children. I have only just begun to find out why my money was given to me, and I am thoroughly enjoying the spending of it."

"Why was it given to you?" asked Cherry.

"To make other people happy. I am finding out that my money does not belong to me at all, but to my Master, and I want to spend it as He would like me to."

"Does all money belong to God?"

"Yes, if we belong to Him."

"Father gave me a gold pound," went on Cherry thoughtfully. "Would God not like me to get toys and nice things for Bonnie and the boys? Are clothes and warm petticoats the only things you ought to get?"

Miss Arnold laughed.

"Oh, you little conscientious mortal! I must take care what I say. My dear, you shall spend that pound exactly as you like. I know it will not be on yourself. It wouldn't make Stacy happy to receive a flannel petticoat, or Bonnie a warm greatcoat! I have been getting things for children whose parents cannot afford to clothe them properly. Toys would not be so suitable."

So Cherry spent her pound with much care, thought, and trouble, and she enjoyed herself thoroughly in doing it. The week went too quickly, but the return home was even more delightful than going away from it. She had brought something for every one, and the Colonel told her, laughingly, that he never imagined a sovereign could go so far. Her little tongue hardly seemed able to stop, she had so much to say; and though the boys laughed at her sometimes, they listened to her accounts of herself in London with considerable interest.

It was the day after her return, that she and Bonnie paid a visit to "Mother's garden." The grass was fresh and green; some primroses and daffodils were already brightening the edge of the shrubbery round it, and the sun streamed across, falling on the four little trees in a

row, and kissing lovingly the little green buds that were sprouting from their stems.

"Oh, Bonnie, if only my tree would have cherries this year!"

Cherry sighed as she spoke. Bonnie looked sober.

"We've asked dear God lots of time to send it cherries. I hope He won't forget. Let's ask Him again, just to remember Him!"

So the two little figures knelt down, and Abercrombie came upon them suddenly, and stole softly away again, muttering to himself—

"Bless the wee lassies! They ken mair than wiser folks, when they tak' their concarns to the Almighty!"

He came mysteriously to Cherry a few days afterwards, and asked her to come with him to visit her tree again.

"I'll no be wantin' to raise yer expectations unduly," he said, "but 'tis the first season I have seen the wee blossoms appearin', an' I thocht I would acquaint ye wi' the fac'!"

Cherry rushed breathlessly forward to see the wonderful sight. She turned with a radiant face to the old man.

"Oh, A.B.C., do tell me! Does it mean it is going to have cherries at last? Is it really true? Are these the beginnings of cherries?"

Abercrombie drew his shaggy brows together, and pursed up his lips.

"Weel, Missy, 'tis customly for fruit to follow blossom. There be aye mony pitfalls, to be sure! The birds may peck, an' the frost may bite, but the probabeelity be for cherries by an' by. An' I'm thinkin' it wull be the sun

that hath accompleeshed the matter. For sin' I cut the twa thick branches awa', the sun ha' just streamed an' streamed, an' the wee tree seems to ken it an' like it weel!"

Cherry fled to tell Bonnie the joyful news, and Bonnie insisted upon repeating it to her father.

"Father dear, just think! Cherry's cumber tree is beginning to have little cherries—do come and see it!"

The Colonel was disinclined to move, but Bonnie's soft little hands got hold of his, and in her grasp the strong man was like wax. He followed her to the spot, and stood, for the first time, looking at his wife's handiwork.

Cherry was there, kneeling down by her tree with loving solicitude.

"Look, father, see!" she cried, in a trembling voice. "It is really true—I do believe it is going to have cherries at last!"

"Of course it is," asserted Bonnie; "we've prayed and prayed to dear God. And He has done it at last."

The Colonel tried to look interested, but he was at a loss to understand the two children's excitement.

"Very nice indeed," he said, "but you will have to wait a little before you see cherries on it."

"It's been a cumber tree, father, don't you remember!" exclaimed Bonnie; "and Cherry was the only one that had a cumber tree. Stacy's and Phil's and my little tree weren't cumber trees—they got fruit on them. Cherry's tree was like the one in the Bible. You know!—the one you read to me about. And Cherry said it would have to be cut down if it hadn't cherries, because it was a cumber. And it made us so sorry, and we prayed to God ever so many times about it, and now

it isn't going to be a cumber tree any more. Isn't it wunnerful!"

Bonnie poured this out rapidly. The Colonel looked at Cherry's flushed cheeks and bright eyes, and then at the little tree. The ways of children still puzzled him, but he was beginning to understand them better.

"You didn't like your little tree being a failure?" he said, putting his hand on Cherry's shoulder.

She looked up at him, and happy tears crowded into her eyes.

"Mother put it in the ground, father, when I was a baby, so it is a kind of—part of me. That's what I think. And I have wanted to be a proper fruit tree, and it seemed no good, for A.B.C. said it would never do any better, and I thought it was just like me. And I've been trying so hard, and then Miss Arnold and me tried together——"

Cherry paused. This was a little bit of her life that was difficult to talk about. Bonnie had run off to call the boys to see the sight, but the Colonel did not go away. He sat down on "Mother's" seat, and drew his little daughter to him.

"Well—tell me all about it. I want to understand."

Cherry leant her head against her father's shoulder, and fingered his watch chain nervously.

"Miss Arnold and me tried not to be cumberers. At least, she showed me how not to be; but I couldn't be sure I was getting any fruit, and then I found out two more verses in the Bible that told me about it, and Miss Arnold explained them."

"What were the verses?" asked her father.

"I told you one of them, father, when Miss Arnold

wrote to me—don't you remember? 'The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, longsuffering, gentleness, goodness, faith, meekness, temperance.' I tried hard to do all those things, but I couldn't keep remembering them. And then I got the other text, 'He that abideth in Me, and I in him, the same bringeth forth much fruit; for without Me ye can do nothing!' And Miss Arnold told me about that too. She said it meant letting Jesus come into my heart and stop there; and that seemed easier than the other, and I have asked Him to come."

There was a pause.

Then Cherry went on hurriedly: "And I often wonder when I shall get fruit; but now my tree is beginning to get some, don't you think it may be that p'r'aps God is telling me I'm just beginning too? Do you think it possibly might be, father?"

There was such earnest longing in her uplifted eyes, that the Colonel got up from his seat with a full heart.

"I think you are growing up a good little girl," he said; "and I am sure you need not think yourself a cumberer of the ground. Mrs. Tipkins was telling me the other day how useful you are making yourself in the house."

Then he went away and left her; and Bonnie and the boys came racing along to see the wonder, and make their own comments on it.

CHAPTER XVII

Cherries

IT was Cherry's birthday, and a lovely day in June. When she got out of bed in the morning she felt that she was indeed the happiest little girl in the world. First it was going to be a holiday; then she was going to have a party—all the Vicarage children, and of course Miss Arnold, had been invited; and lastly, she was going to gather with her own hands some ripe red cherries off her tree, and they were to be the centre dish on her tea-table. How those cherries had been counted and watched! Abercrombie was as proud of them as she had been. He had guarded them from the birds by fine netting, and had paid them a morning and evening visit every day. It was he who had suggested that they should not be gathered till her birthday came round, and Cherry longed for the day when others besides herself should see and taste the fruit of her own little tree.

The schoolroom table was crowded with presents for her, and Abercrombie had sent a lovely bouquet of some of his most cherished flowers to be placed on her plate. Stacy had promised to let her ride his pony after break-

fast; the boys were brimful of excitement over their holiday. Mr. Hastings went off with the Vicar for a bicycle ride, so he left them to their own devices, and the morning passed without a shadow to spoil the sunshine that prevailed.

"Why," said Phil at luncheon, in his argumentative tone, "is a birthday supposed to be such a good thing for a person to have? Cherry is such a wonderful creature to-day, yet she hasn't done anything, and we've got to treat her quite different to every other day."

"It is a custom," said Mr. Hastings, smiling at the gravity of Phil's tone, "to offer good wishes to people once a year, and their birthday is the day to do this. It means that you are glad they are alive and happy, and hope they will be so in another year's time. You get your birthday, Phil, in due time, so don't be envious of Cherry."

"But grown-up people don't make such a fuss on their birthdays," argued Phil.

"Sometimes they do. I think we perhaps get to have so many birthdays that we become tired of them; and as you get older you will find the old friends and relations who knew your birthday drop away one by one, and soon every one is a stranger to you and takes no interest in you."

"When is your birthday?" demanded Stacy.

"Ah, that is best unknown."

And Mr. Hastings turned the conversation on other matters.

At four o'clock, Cherry and Bonnie, in their best white frocks, were welcoming their guests on the lawn. Grace headed the Vicarage party; she and Mr. Hastings,

when not joining in the games that followed, walked about the garden together, for they had many interests in common. Grace was passionately fond of reading, and whenever she could snatch a few minutes away from her mending basket and household cares, would whip a book out of her pocket and become completely absorbed in it. Mr. Hastings very often lent her books, and there was nothing Grace liked better than a talk with him about them.

Miss Arnold arrived shortly before tea-time. Tea was spread out on a long table under one of the old elms on the lawn. When it was ready Cherry left her games, and crept up quietly to her friend.

"Miss Arnold, will you come with me while I pick my cherries? A.B.C. says I had better do it now."

"To be sure I will, with the greatest pleasure!"

So they went down the path that led to the little trees. Bonnie missed them, and soon came rushing up—

"Oh, let me come too! I want to see Cherry pick them."

Cherry was trembling with eagerness and importance. It was not a very large crop, but as each ripe cherry dropped from her fingers on the plate which Abercrombie held respectfully forward, Miss Arnold's eyes filled with sudden tears. She knew the story of the little tree so well. Looking at the flushed, sensitive little face leaning over her possession so tenderly, she seemed to see again the anxious lines on the white brow, the wistful sadness in the eyes and voice, when Cherry first acquainted her with its existence: "I've got a cumberer tree of my own. It's no good, and it never will be, and I feel it's just like me."

"It isn't a cumber tree any more!" announced Bonnie joyfully as she danced round and round her sister. "Oh I do hope there will be one cherry for each of us!"

The tree was stripped at last, and then Cherry looked up and met Miss Arnold's gaze.

"It's done," she said; "and I almost feel sorry I have taken them off. It seems so cruel, doesn't it, when they looked so pretty on it? Do you think my tree will miss its cherries, Miss Arnold?"

"No, I think this is the proudest day of its life," said Miss Arnold smiling; "when it bore fruit for its little mistress, and she came and gathered every one herself!"

They walked back to the lawn, and as Cherry was placing her fruit in the centre of the tea-table, her father came upon the scene.

"This is a grand occasion," he said, "so I have to share your honours, Cherry. What! is this the fruit from your wonderful tree?"

Cherry took the top cherry off the plate, and held it out. "Taste it, father. I haven't tasted one yet, and I do want to know if they are sweet."

Colonel St. Leger took it, and put it into his mouth. "Excellent" was his verdict, and Cherry's last fear vanished. The other children came crowding to the table now, and she was kept busy pouring out tea, and cutting her birthday cake. When the cherries were handed round, her little heart swelled with pride. The boys' remarks did not vex her. She was above and beyond vexation now.

"Better late than never!" said Stacy. "Fancy! Angus, this is the first year since Cherry was born that her cherry-tree has got any cherries on it!"

"Yes," said Phil, "my tree has done very well, but I thought Cherry's was dead. I don't know how she managed to get any on it this year. By crying over it, I believe!"

The day ended at last. Very tired but very happy, Cherry turned away from the gate where she had been saying goodbye to the Vicarage children, and sauntered back to the house. She met Miss Arnold coming out of the hall door.

"I am waiting for my carriage, Cherry. Are you too tired to walk down the drive again with me?"

"Oh no! Hasn't it been a lovely day, Miss Arnold? And aren't you glad about my cherries?"

"Yes, little woman. I have been thinking a good deal about them, and do you know I have been preaching a delicious little sermon to myself about them."

"Have you? Oh, do tell me!"

"I was thinking of your old gardener. He told me he thought he knew the reason of your tree not blossoming before. It was in too shady a spot. He had never taken much notice of it before you began to worry over it so, and then he cut away some great boughs that were between it and the sun. Directly the sun, in all its power and strength, began to shine upon it, the tree began to thrive."

"Yes," said Cherry; "that's what A.B.C. told me. But, you see, I prayed to God about it, and He made the cherries come."

"Yes, and He did it by showing Abercrombie how to treat it."

Then, after a slight pause, Miss Arnold went on—

"I've been thinking, Cherry, that plants and people

are very much alike. Do you know why people are cumberers?"

"No."

"Because the Sun of Righteousness isn't shining into their hearts and making it blossom. There are some great big black branches that are keeping the Sun out, and they must be cut away."

"And who will cut them?"

"Our Gardener, if we are willing that they should be cut."

Cherry was silent. The parable that was such a delight to Miss Arnold was a little above her head.

Then the carriage came up, and Miss Arnold stooped and kissed her.

"Goodbye, darling. I mustn't call you my little fellow-cumberer again. We won't worry ourselves about our fruit. All we have to do is to see that there are no big branches between us and the Sun."

FINIS.

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